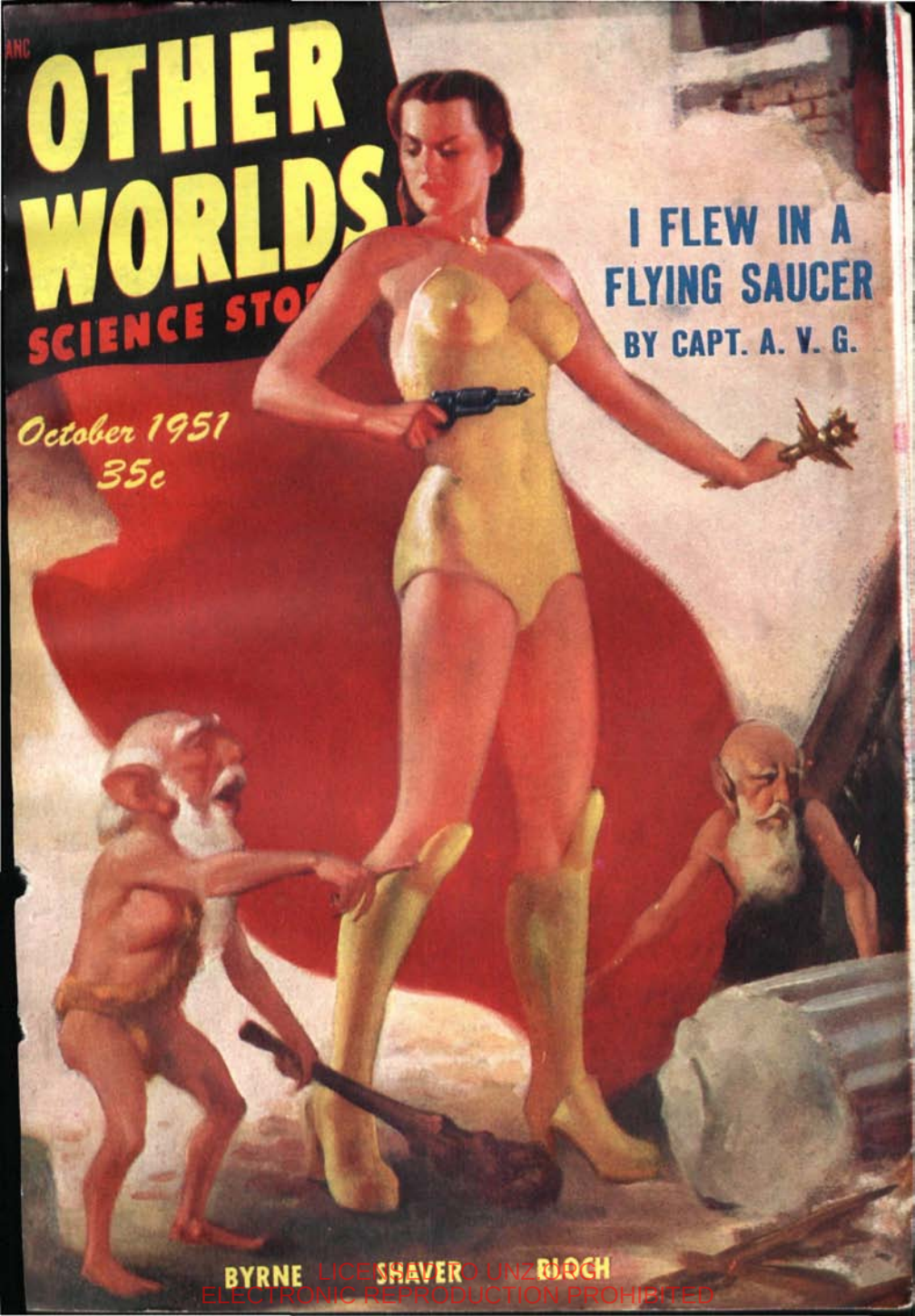

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A. MERRITT
Master Of Fantasy

By Darrell C. Richardson

TO many thousands of readers and fans A. Merritt is *THE* Master of Fantasy. Through the years he has captured the imagination of countless lovers of unusual literature. To many, indeed the very name "MERRITT" stands for the best in Fantasy.

Unlike many other writers in the genre Merritt was a "quality" writer rather than a "quantity" writer This meant that all of his Fantasy tales demonstrated his unique tal-

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EDITORIAL

LET'S go statistical for once! In short, let's deal with facts rather than with fiction. To begin with OTHER WORLDS usually contains somewhere between 60,000 and 70,000 words of fiction and anywhere from 5,000 to 10,000 words of features. Actually, one of the leading magazines in reading quantity. We won't say anything here about quality, because quality is an elusive thing. Some of us define it one way some another—OTHER WORLDS always tries to have the best that comes across its editorial desk. What we really want to get at is that although we have as much as 80,000 separate and individual words in each issue a problem has begun to confront your editor in regard to space. Yes, we said space. Imagine 80,000 words not being enough to take care of any story we can secure! Well, the time has come, so to speak, to take our eyes off mice and begin to look at dinosaurs.

Just recently it has been our good fortune to read several science fiction novels which have so impressed us and given us so much terrific enjoyment that we felt our readers *must* share in our pleasure. But, and it's a big but, one of them ran 120,000 words. The answer is obvious—it just doesn't fit "nohow".

This situation vexes us. It makes us mad. It gives your editor a large shot of defiance. Says he: "*This* we publish, no matter what we have to do to accomplish the feat!"

So, starting with this issue you'll find a small beginning to the answer to the problem: we are publishing the first serial in OTHER WORLD's career (except probably for the Colossus I - II - III series) and we are scheduling more. We *know* you'll like the idea, when you've begun to comprehend what it will mean to the quality of stories you will read in OTHER WORLDS.

There are various ways to read serials: 1) Save the parts until you have them all; 2) read them as they appear, and wait with mouth watering for the next installment. Personally we could never wait till we had them all, and we got quite a thrill out of the suspense involved. Therefore, as reader rather than editor, we advise you not to wait, but to plunge right in. That's what *we're* doing in giving you these serials.

Let's give you a hint of the treats in store for you. 1) S. J. Byrne, author of the Prometheus Series in *Amazing Stories* and the Colossus Series in OTHER WORLDS, is preparing the *third* great novel in this related trilogy of trilogies. Only this time it's *one* gigantic story rather than three integrated novelettes—and if you think "The Golden Guardsmen" isn't going to make science fiction history your editor intends to change your thinking! 2) Rog Phillips is finishing up what is perhaps his greatest work, far exceeding his "So Shall Ye Reap" (you see, *we* have to read these things in serial form too, as the author writes them!). Anyway, if you miss "These Are My Children" you will live to regret it. 3) For those fans of Richard S. Shaver, and for those as

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well who are not merely fans of his Mystery, he has penned a novel of straight science fiction which we think will establish him with the truly great of his field of imaginative writing. We pride ourselves on having had the good fortune to grab this off before any of our science fiction editor friends got a chance to look at it. 4) Richard Ashby has given us a two-part serial which we predict will stop you in your tracks. Here is a story with real daring. You'll see some long-standing taboos broken by this one, and some long-standing memories of a very pleasureable sort, set up.

There are more, however we won't go on with the list. But you'll remember such titles as "Empire of Jegga" (which was a 102,500 word novel publisher by *Amazing Stories* quite a few years ago); "The Star Kings" by Edmond Hamilton (also published by *Amazing Stories*, and later as a book); and many other stories of the extremely long type which have remained as classics in the science fiction field. If you *do* remember, then you know what to expect; if you don't, then consider that your editor, who has read science fiction for thirty-five years, is tremendously excited about these novels. He'll get them to you if he has to send them to you by Western Union!

Several weeks ago (we're writing this in June) *Life* magazine ran an article concerning science fiction which, personally, we felt was written with a rather tongue-in-cheek style. Actually we science fiction people are a bit more on the serious side than that depicted by *Life's* writer. What interested us most was their handling of the Shaver Mystery, since we are the creators of that most famous of all science fiction controversies.

Life didn't go into the merits or de-merits of the Mystery, and neither will we, except to say that no science fiction story has ever held more selling power. We mention that as part of our "statistical information" in this editorial to point out the factual basis we have in recommending the coming serial by Mr. Shaver.

If only one instance do we want to correct *Life's* statements: Your editor did not leave the employ of Ziff-Davis and *Amazing Stories* because of the "killing" of the Shaver Mystery when it "disagreed" with Einstein; he remained several years after it was dropped, and quit as all you readers of OTHER WORLDS know, to publish this magazine and its sister FATE. Nor was he disgruntled because of the demise of the Shaver Mystery, as evidenced by the fact that he did not adopt it for his own magazine. Further, Ziff-Davis, and Mr. Ziff in particular, did not "kill" anything. It was always a policy of that company to allow editors free rein in judgment, and the enormous success of their publications is a reflection of this admirable policy. It was the policy of Mr. Ziff and Mr. Davis to use intelligence in the handling of their magazines, and not just plain "opinion" nor did they indulge in personalities. The Shaver Mystery ended because it had run its course. Anything further would have been a re-hash of what had gone before.

We do agree with *Life* in one particular: Science Fiction is definitely a large and healthy part of the American Scene. *Rap.*

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Music From Down Under

By Joquel Kennedy

Song pluggers may be annoying, but they're not usually considered frightening. Not usually, that is, until Sam starts telling about the timid little man who sold Bill Paley the music that made him famous—for a while!

I don't ride the subway any more. To go down in a cellar, even, takes all the willpower I've got. And last summer when my wife suggested a trip to Mammoth Cave, I came near having convulsions.

Why?

It never would have started if Paley hadn't played the Imperial. When I saw the ad in the paper, I decided to knock off work for the afternoon.

I used to be a sideman for Bill Paley. Tenor sax. Toured up and down the Corn Belt doing one-night stands, until I got thoroughly fed up with buses and cheap hotels and laundries that give four-hour service. Then I got into a decent business. I've been in Newark ever since, repairing mimeograph machines. I'm my own boss and I like it fine. You'd be surprised how many people there are in Newark with broken mimeographs.

Paley did not draw much of a house. The matinee audience at the Imperial was mostly high school kids playing hookey and salesmen resting their feet. Paley was up there big as life, waving the stick without much pep. He put the boys through a watered-down version of Stravinsky's *Firebird,* then a stomp version of the *Bolero,* which drew a faint patter of applause. Paley always did go in for highbrow stuff, which is probably why his outfit never hit the money.

After the curtain came down, the house band in the pit scraped out ten bars of "Jingle Bells" and then filed out to resume their pinochle game. The western picture started, so I went backstage to see Paley.

In the narrow corridor that led to his dressing room, I rammed squarely into a decidedly odd looking character. He got very flustered and begged my pardon a couple of times in an accent I couldn't place. I shot a glance at his face and my stomach almost turned. You notice lots of pale individuals these days, but this one was absolutely the color of snow. I'd seen more expressive eyes in dead codfish.

Snow-face seemed to hover in front

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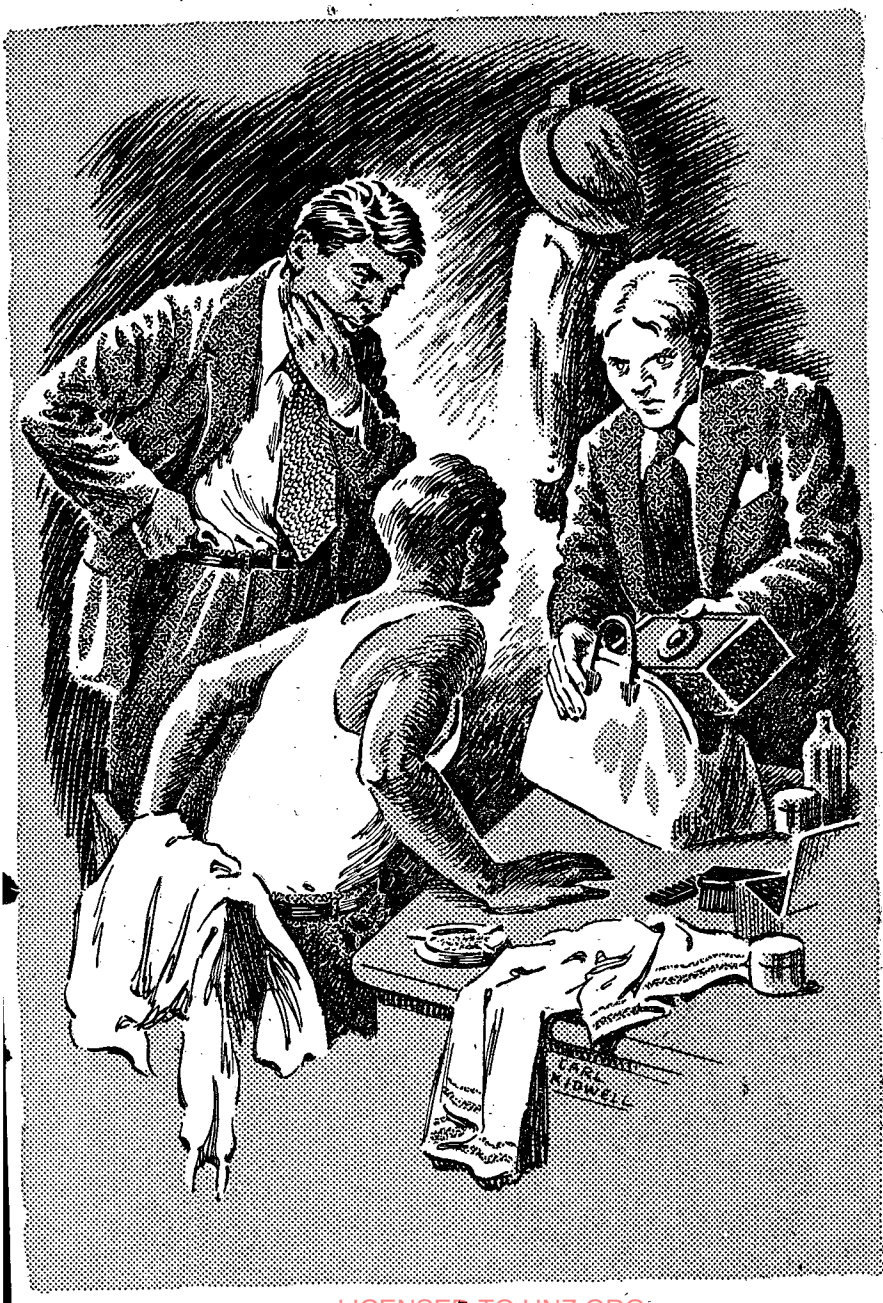

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of Paley's door as if debating whether to go in. I shouldered past him into the dressing room and asked Paley how the hell he was.

"Frankly, Sam," he admitted, "not so good." His boiled shirt was draped over a chair, and he looked as if he could use about forty-eight hours sleep.

"It's killing me to make expenses," he told me. "There's not much in these second-string theater dates. Every time pay day comes around, I can't look my men in the eye."

"Well why don't you play polkas?" I suggested. "Or get bazookas and wear funny hats."

After I said this I felt sorry, because Paley's face assumed a hurt look.

"Sam," he said, "maybe you think I'm a fool, but I take this business seriously. I believe in the stuff I play. If I didn't, I wouldn't feel right about it."

There came a weak knock on the door just then. Paley bawled "Come in!" and the character with the snow-white complexion timidly pushed the door open.

"You must excuse me, Mr. Paley, but I've got to speak to you. I—I have some music which I believe might interest you—"

So that was it. I guessed I'd figured out this character now. Undoubtedly he was a song-plugger, a species of beetle which all the time pesters bandleaders, trying to pimp its beery ballads and ricky-ticky cowboy songs.

Apparently Paley figured it that way too. "Well, I can't give you much time," he said in annoyance. "I'm doing six shows a day, you understand."

"Oh thank you, thank you, Mr. Paley," said the character. I could see now that he was a little man, for the top of his head barely came up to my shoulder. I am five-one.

"My name is Omm, O-M-M," he spelled. "I shall show you some of my compositions." He snapped open a satchel and tugged out a pile of oversized music paper, which he dropped in Paley's lap.

Paley scowled. "What the devil kind of orchestration is this? It looks like—my god—a fourteen tone scale, and there are hardly any rests in it."

"You cannot judge my music adequately from the paper."

"Well play it, then," said Paley, waving toward a hoary piano in the corner.

"I myself cannot play any instrument," the little man said apologetically. "Would you listen to this recording? You can hear my music performed by a full orchestra—"

Out of the satchel he was dragging a rectangular box, constructed of some blue metal. There were no controls on it except for one little stud on top. Paley stared at this, but I wasn't much surprised, after some of the peculiar things the recording companies have been bringing out lately.

Omm pressed the stud and out of the box came music—*but what mu-*

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sic!. It was like nothing under the sun I'd ever listened to. You've heard symphony orchestras try to play jazz? Well, this was jazz all right, and it was a symphony orchestra, but — different. Long melancholy chords that quivered into your ears and made your whole body tremble; strange and beautiful purrings like a hurt kitten crying softly. Instruments that laughed and tootled and chirped, and the notes came sliding out like quicksilver—now savage as a jungle dance, now weird, oriental. Indescribable strummings . . . violins that shrilled longingly . . . only they weren't violins. I don't know what they were. There was something out-of-this-worldish about it all. At first the rhythm section sounded like drums and guitar and double bass, but to trained ears like mine they were no kind of instruments I'd ever heard before. It seemed—well, like an orchestra of grasshoppers or katydids or—Lord only knows. And yet it was magnificent stuff, stirring and hard to forget.

Paley sat there entranced. When the final sounds died away, he sprang out of his chair and grabbed the little man by the arm. Omm stepped back quickly in fright.

"Play it again," said Paley earnestly.

"I—I can't. The case is good only once." He dropped the metal box to the floor and stepped on it. It fractured neatly in half. "See?" said Omm. "It's empty." He picked up the broken halves and tucked them into his satchel again.

My jaw must have dropped about five inches.

Paley had snatched up the music sheets the little man had given him and was running a finger intently over the score. "Ummmm . . . have to train the boys to read music all over again . . . We could do that with French horns . . . need flutes and an oboe too . . . ."

I knew then that Paley was all wrapped up in his find; and there wasn't much point in trying to talk to him. When I left, the two of them were hunched over the score, the little man jabbing at the pages with a wax-like finger, explaining his music to Paley note by note.

I didn't think about it any more until the jangling phone rooted me out of bed at one a.m.

"Hello, Sam," came Paley's excited voice from the other end. "I'm going to do it! I'm going to reorganize the band and play this new kind of music! Know any place the boys can rehearse?"

"What about your stand at the Imperial?" I countered sleepily.

"The hell with it. I tell you, Sam, this new stuff is terrific. Come on, man, think! Isn't there any spot in town that's empty and quiet?"

"Well," I said, "there's old man Czipo's hall. The Elks aren't using it now—"

"Good enough. Give me his number, I want to rent it."

I told him and went back to bed.

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The next day, after I finished explaining to the Ladies' Aid Society that their new mimeograph machine wouldn't work unless they put ink in it, I legged over to the hall to see how Paley was making out. Weird squawks and squeals were drifting from the second-story window. I mounted the dingy stairs. The first person I met was the trombonist, nicknamed Liverlips for obvious reasons. He was out in the hallway grabbing a smoke and scowling at a sheet of paper in his hand.

"For the sweet love of heaven, Sam, will you look at this?" He rattled the sheet of paper in my face. "What a score! Flights of hemidemisemiquavers, one right after the other! I am supposed to play this stuff on my tram? Phooey!"

Inside, the original for all the cartoons about long-haired musicians was clutching his bassoon and talking to a seedy violinist. I wondered what gutterband Paley had robbed them out of. The maestro himself was frantically jawing at the piano player.

"I tell you, Steve, you're not playing boogie! You run it up an octave higher—like this!"

"And I tell you, boss, there aren't enough keys on the piano!"

I looked around for the composer, but he wasn't in sight.

I wished Paley luck and went away.

A month later William Paley and his New Orchestra opened at the Castle o' Dreams, a brassy but second-rate ballroom over in Queens. Band agencies have a custom of booking a new aggregation into an obscure spot for its opening date. If the band needs more polish before heading for the bigtime, there's less harm done.

My wife and I went over to see the unveiling. Word had leaked out that Paley really had something this time, so there was a fair-sized crowd on hand. Staff writers for *Down Beat* and *Metronome* were sizing up the crew, which looked more like the Philharmonic than a dance band. But most of the crowd consisted of pimple-faced youths and their girl friends, who dressed in flashy stripes and spoke a language none but an initiate could understand.

Then Paley gave the downbeat and a funny thing happened. The lights blinked low, the music began, but nobody started to dance. The crowd stood there listening, just listening, as the big rich chords came stealing forth, and the violins began to cry sweetly, quietly, like beautiful women. Then in came the French horns, and I had to admit they sounded lovely, then the rest of the brass section opened up and joined the strings. And there it was, that feeling that you were hearing something out of another world, the feeling I'd had when I listened to Omm's metal case. True, Paley's music didn't come anywhere near the recording that the little man had played. But just the same it was strange and

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thrilling and beautiful, and when the number ended the crowd whistled and clapped until I thought the roof would cave in.

I spotted Omm standing near the door, a faint frown on his pasty white face. I thought I'd say hello to him, but before I could wriggle through the crowd, he'd slipped away.

FROM then on, Paley went straight to the top. He played the Meadowbrook in Jersey, had airshots galore on all four networks, and did theater dates up and down Broadway. Even the art-and-beauty birds began getting interested in him; and long commentaries filled the music columns of the *Trib* and the *Times*.

The day Paley opened at the Paramount, I couldn't resist hopping the tube to Manhattan. The ushers were going nutty trying to control the crowds. When I tried to reach Paley's dressing room between shows, the autograph fiends were wedged outside like olives in a bottle. My luck, Paley spotted me, promptly announced he was stepping out for lunch, and came battling his way toward me, dragging little Omm after him, while the autograph hunters groaned "Awwww-w-w!" and "Gee whiz!"

On forty-eighth street there is a small Italian place where the waiters aren't ashamed to hand you the check right side up. We grabbed a table near the window, the three of us. Paley ordered chicken cacciatore. I wanted a pie.

"And what's yours?" said the waiter, turning to the little man.

Omm seemed flustered. "No — nothing—I'm not hungry. Just a glass of water, please."

"So you're riding high these days, eh, Willie?" I grinned at Paley as we sat there watching the crowds flow by.

"What did I tell you, Sam? It's terrific. We've got the public crying for more. The boys in the band are happy, I eat three times a day again —and it's all because of Omm. He's a genius. He's greater than Beethoven. Which reminds me." He turned to the little man. "I might's well give you your cut from the record royalties."

He fished out his checkbook and scrawled a sum with five figures, not counting the decimal-point ought ought.

The little man waved the check in the air to dry the ink.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

We ate in silence, the genius greater than Beethoven ogling us as we pushed food into our mouths.

"For the love of mike," I said at last, "if you don't want to eat anything yourself, will you kindly quit staring at me that way?"

"I'm sorry," Omm begged. "I—I will eat."

To my astonishment he hauled out a small paper bag and began nibbling something green.

I said, "If you don't mind my being personal, what is that you're eating?"

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Omm smiled.

"Mulberry leaves," he said.

I damn well near fell out of the chair.

"You know," I said finally, "ever since I first saw you, I've had the impression you were a foreigner. Do you come from around here?"

"I come from ———," said Omm, making a peculiar clucking noise with his tongue, which I could not begin to spell.

"Is that a member of the United Nations?"

He was opening his mouth to answer, but then the waiter arrived with the wine.

Omm sat there, his thin nose slowly wrinkling in curiosity.

"That fluid has an interesting odor," he observed to Bill. "May I take a sip from your glass?"

Paley grimaced. "Waiter! Another scuppernong!"

Omm downed three glasses of the stuff, one right after another. Scuppernong is not a particularly heavy wine, but from the effect it had on the little guy, I guessed he wasn't accustomed to even the mildest alcoholic beverages. It was remarkable to watch him. His fishy eyes began to glitter like jewels; he started to jabber at great length and very wildly. I didn't get much of what he said, but I gathered he was talking about the country he came from. Music, it seems, was the rage there, and apparently the citizens spent most of their time listening to concerts or giving them.

The wine had put the little man in an eager, confiding mood. "You must come to my apartment," he pleaded with me. There are many things I will show you—things you will hardly believe!"

Paley was getting up to head back to the theater. I hesitated about going to the little guy's apartment. For all I knew, he might be getting funny ideas.

Omm was still tugging at my arm. "I want so much that you hear my music!" he begged. "I want you to admire it, the glorious music of my people! Better than this trash the band plays. You will come and you will hear!"

Well, that got me. Ever since I'd listened to the metal box that got hollow when the music left it, I'd been hoping to catch some more of the same.

"How far is your apartment?"

"Only downtown!"

"All right," I said, "I'll go with you."

WE rode down forty blocks on the subway, and came up in the middle of the Village. An incredible mixture of cooking smells hit my nose. A hungry sculptor had all his bronzes and terra-cottas out on the sidewalk, but few of the passers-by seemed interested, and nobody was buying.

I followed the little white man through a maze of narrow streets, past brownstone mansions that must have been there when Washington

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Irving was. As Omm skittered along ahead of me, I couldn't help being reminded of a beetle, or some other kind of bug.

The trail came to halt in a dead-end street. I haven't the least idea what street it was, because the sign had dropped out of its holder and hadn't been replaced.

"Here," said the little man proudly, "is my apartment house."

It looked older than Cheops' tomb and just as dark. The glass was missing from most of the window frames, the bricks were coated with grime. I realized suddenly that the whole street was one of these ghost-town sections of New York I'd read about, and sure enough, as I glanced about I could see that nobody inhabited the other crumbling houses, for most of the doors were boarded up.

The little man beckoned from a flight of steps leading downward.

"You mean you live in the cellar?" I gaped. I was convinced by now that great composers were queer.

All of a sudden, like a thunderclap, the front door of the house banged open. A little fat woman in a tight-fitting gray dress stood there, arms folded on her bosom. I looked at her face and got a jolt. It was white like the little man's.

The woman was angry. "You brought a stranger here," she glowered down at Omm, who stood transfixed on the cellar steps.

The little man's brow darkened. He seemed to quiver all over with rage. "Go away!" he shrilled at the woman. "Can't I bring people here if I want to? Am I always to be shut off from them? Won't you ever let me alone—not ever?"

He twisted a key in the basement lock, rattled the door open. He motioned for me to follow.

But the woman didn't go away. She stationed herself at the top of the steps, and all the while I stayed in Omm's cellar apartment she stood there, glaring down at me with eyes like little steel marbles.

I guessed she was his landlady.

Every other song-writer I knew had at least a piano in his place. Omm didn't. In fact, there was nothing but a bare cement room with a large circular rug in the middle, a table and a chair, and crates of electrical equipment stacked all over the floor.

"I don't mean to criticize your place," I told him, "but if I had what Paley is paying you, I'd live like a sultan."

This remark seemed to infuriate the little man.

"How can I live in luxury," he squealed, "when every cent my music brings must be spent to help my people?"

So the little guy was a philanthropist! Well, he could sail paper airplanes with his money, for all I cared.

"Have you ever starved?" he he shrilled at me. "Have you? Do you know what it's like to see your friends, your family, your children

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wasting away for want of food?"

I've had my hungry moments and I told him so.

I inspected the room more closely. My knowledge of electronics is slightly fuzzy, but from what I could see through the slats in the packing cases, I guessed the apparatus must be dynamos.

"Oh," I said politely, "you dabble in electricity. What's all this stuff for?"

"What do you think it's for?" Omm snapped. "You can't have sunlamps without any power!" He waved impatiently toward a cluster of tall thin shapes covered over with tarpaulins.

I decided to goad him.

"And where will you get the electricity to run the dynamos?"

"Water power!"

"Oh? There's water where you come from?"

Omm's colorless eyes became slits.

"Torrents," he said.

By this time, the woman on the stairs was waggling her head furiously and glaring at me with murder in her eyes.

I was getting a bit weary of Omm and his sun lamps.

I said, "All that's very nice, but I came here for that concert. How about it?"

No sooner were these words out of my mouth than a large van roared to a stop outside. The driver, with hardly a glance at the fat woman, came clumping down the steps.

"Sunnyglen Nurseries," he barked. "Here's your shipment, mister, but we don't unload 'em till I'm paid in full. Boss's orders. Two thousand and seventeen dollars. Had to import 'em from Japan, you know."

Without a murmur, the little man dug into his pocket and pulled out a roll of bills. The van-driver counted the money very carefully, scribbled a receipt, then stuck his head out the door and bawled, "All right, boys, bring in them mulberry trees!"

The woman in gray was now giving me such a vile look that I decided to exit, then and there. I didn't wait for the music Omm had promised.

But I was to hear it later, all right — under circumstances that scared hell out of me.

FOUR days went by, and the Greek who runs the Chinese restaurant dropped his mimeograph and flattened the drum. Right away he started howling that he needed it to run off the evening menu. The machine was an old Gestetner, and I didn't have a drum in stock that would fit. It was a good excuse to go to New York again and see Paley.

The guard at the Paramount gave me a hard time, but I finally reached Paley's dressing room. The band was just coming offstage, peeling out of their coats and dabbing their foreheads with handkerchiefs. I didn't blame them. That weird stuff of Omm's was *work* to play.

Paley was glad to see me. And how he was glad to see me. He fell all over me, he was frantic, he trem-

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bled like a sick man.

"Sam! For the love of heaven, I was just going to phone you!"

"Take it easy, fella." I helped him into his dressing room and tried to make him sit down. He insisted on standing, and waving his arms to boot.

"You've got to find him!" he said desperately. "You've got to make him listen to reason!"

"Calm down and talk sense. Find who?"

"Omm. The composer. Just before the first show I got a telegram—oh, blazes, read this."

I uncrumpled the wad of yellow paper he thrust at me. The message read:

MR. WILLIAM PALEY
PARAMOUNT THEATER
TIMES SQUARE N. Y. C.
I HAVE NO MORE MUSIC TO SELL YOU. YOU WILL NOT SEE ME AGAIN.
OMM.

"He just can't do this!" shouted Paley, wild-eyed. "The arrangements I bought from the little guy—that's what landed me on top! No more music—no more band. We can't keep playing the same stuff over and over. Sam, you know where he lives. Find him, if you're a friend of mine—*and talk him out of it!*"

Paley wouldn't stop shouting, so what could I do but promise I'd go down to the Village and hunt for the little guy?

I got off the subway at Houston, way downtown. For an hour I wandered through streets that ran in cocked directions, through alleys that ended nowhere. I asked cops. They couldn't tell me how to find an apartment house only two people lived in, and a street without any name.

Quite by accident, I stumbled upon it.

There it was, that row of boarded-up mansions, where cliffs of dirty brick walled the daylight back, and the last slivers of glass gaped in their windowframes like teeth.

The dead end of the street was Omm's house. I started walking toward it.

The basement door was ajar. The landlady wasn't in sight. I inched down the steps . . . quietly.

I got the shock of my life when I kicked that door open.

Omm was standing in the middle of his bare cement room. There There weren't any sun-lamps or dynamos or mulberry trees around.

The little man had only one arm.

He whirled, and the rage in his small, no-color eyes made me stagger back involuntarily.

His white lips formed words carefully:

"Come in. Sit down in that chair."

I don't know why, but although every nerve in my body was telling me to get the hell out of there, I did exactly what he said.

His solitary arm produced a glass and a bottle.

"Have a drink," he said.

He poured it for me. I couldn't help noticing the label on the bottle.

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Scuppernong.

I gulped until I saw the bottom of the glass.

"You've blundered into things that don't concern you," Omm grated slowly. "When the wine loosened my tongue that day, you learned far more than you should."

Now by all the logic in the world, I had no reason to fear that frail, white-faced little man so many sizes smaller than myself.

And yet I did.

Omm leaned forward, and his voice became soft, confiding. "You've come because you want my music. Well you'll get no more. I haven't any further need of money now. Do you really think I *wanted* to sell the art of my people? Do you think I enjoyed hearing it broken — degraded—made into jazz? that clattering tin band—those moon-faced audiences—I wanted to die rather than come here, but *they* made me. They said I had to. It was a question of survival and we" —he paused his eyes brooding— "we had nothing else we could sell."

All of which, at the time, made remarkably little sense to me.

"I came upon a mission. Now it's done. I'm going to leave soon, very soon, but until all traces of my stay have been erased, I don't want you around to lead the others here. And so, for a time, you must be removed—"

He hurled into my lap a flurry of bills. Fifty dollars. A hundred and fifty. Two hundred.

"What's this for?" I heard myself ask.

"This currency will pay your passage to any destination five thousand or more miles from here. In the glass of wine I gave you was a powerful hypnotic. I have planted a suggestion in your mind. You will act upon it."

For a moment the little man's eyes were the only thing alive in his face. And then he laughed shrilly, as if at some secret joke.

"The other day I promised you a concert. I promised to show you things you will hardly believe. The wine was in me when I said that—but I shall keep my word." He threw back his head and out of his throat came a single tone, piercing and shrill like an excellent violin. I had heard such a sound from the little man's music box. But that had been a full orchestra.

Alone, Omm was only one instrument.

The tone sharpened . . . grew louder . . . stabbed into my eardrums like a blade.

"Stop it!" I screamed.

The tone stopped. Abruptly, as if the blade had snapped.

As my gaze widened, Omm's remaining arm dropped off. It shattered as it struck the floor, and I saw that it was wax; Then one leg followed, and then the other. Before my eyes the mass of clothing on the floor squirmed and wriggled, and out of that mass a nightmare crawled.

I turned. I fled. I clawed open the

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door. I staggered blindly halfway up the stairs.

On the very top step loomed the woman in gray. Ever so faintly, she smiled.

I must have stood there—motionless—for one full minute by the clock. I saw now why the woman's gray dress fit so tightly.

It was spun about her body like a cocoon.

I reeled back into that cellar room, where the circular rug was rolled carefully away from the gleaming round pit in the floor. Omm was nowhere in sight.

I was crazy with fear. For a moment I had a wild idea that the pit was an avenue to safety. On hands and knees, I crept to the edge and peered in.

It was a shaft of blue steel, and it dropped straight down. As God is my judge, it had no bottom. From the rim of the pit into the shaft far below, a thread of grayness was spinning. On the end of the thread hung a squirming thing. It was reeling itself slowly down into the darkness.

Then my mind clouded as the drug took hold. When the cloud went away I was on the airliner, with a ticket stamped HONOLULU in my pocket.

I picked pineapples for a month to make my fare home, steerage, first class. I had the devil's own time getting my wife to come back. She thought I'd run off with a woman. Of course I didn't dare tell her about the blue steel shaft, but since then I've been doing research in the public library. I've come across some things that make you wonder. Items in old newspapers, about people whose work takes them down into the ground. Like for instance that sandhog digging the Lincoln Tunnel who swore he kept hearing strange music.

I have a theory. For aeons greater than we know, men have wrested metals out of the Earth. Suppose, a long time ago, a bunch of miners lost their way underground—

Paley is back playing second-string theaters. We go to see him every time he's in town. My wife and I spend most Friday nights in New York and sometimes Saturdays, but I never found the street with no name again, or the crumbling brick house with the steps going down.

You know something?

Maybe that's because I never looked.

THE END

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LIGHTNING over SATURN

By Richard S. Shaver & Chester S. Geier

The Starquest had all organized piracy chasing her; the trouble was, she was unarmed. But old Carl Vierling had an idea about Saturn's lightning.

BEN Wolf knew something was wrong even as he guided the launch down toward the mountainous, hollowed-out chunk of rock in Saturn's rings, which Arn Vierling out of a deep affection had christened the Lab. First the all-clear signal had failed to come through, indicating that something had happened to the detectors which were supposed to warn those at the Lab of approaching craft. And then his anxious radioed questions had gone unanswered. Silence at the Lab — complete, frightening silence.

Wolf's strongly molded features were bleakly set behind the transparent bubble helmet of his space armor — for armor was always worn by those who threaded the deadly rock maze of the rings. He thought with a sick, gnawing urgency of Arn and her father-in-law, Carl Vierling, the two who had come to mean more to him than life itself — even more in some ways than the *Starquest*, the fruit of their united labors for the past three years. If anything had happened to them —

But what could possibly have taken place? An accident, perhaps? It was true that old Carl's experiments were frequently dangerous. But an accident for that cause could hardly account for the complete silence of those at the Lab.

Wolf suddenly wished he hadn't insisted on making a last trip to Titan. Most of the food and equipment he had gone to obtain hadn't been entirely necessary, consisting of gifts and little luxuries to celebrate the completion of the *Starquest*. For it was a truly momentous occasion. The *Starquest* was the forerunner of the ships which for the first time would carry the race of man beyond the limits of the Solar System and out to the numberless worlds of the galaxy.

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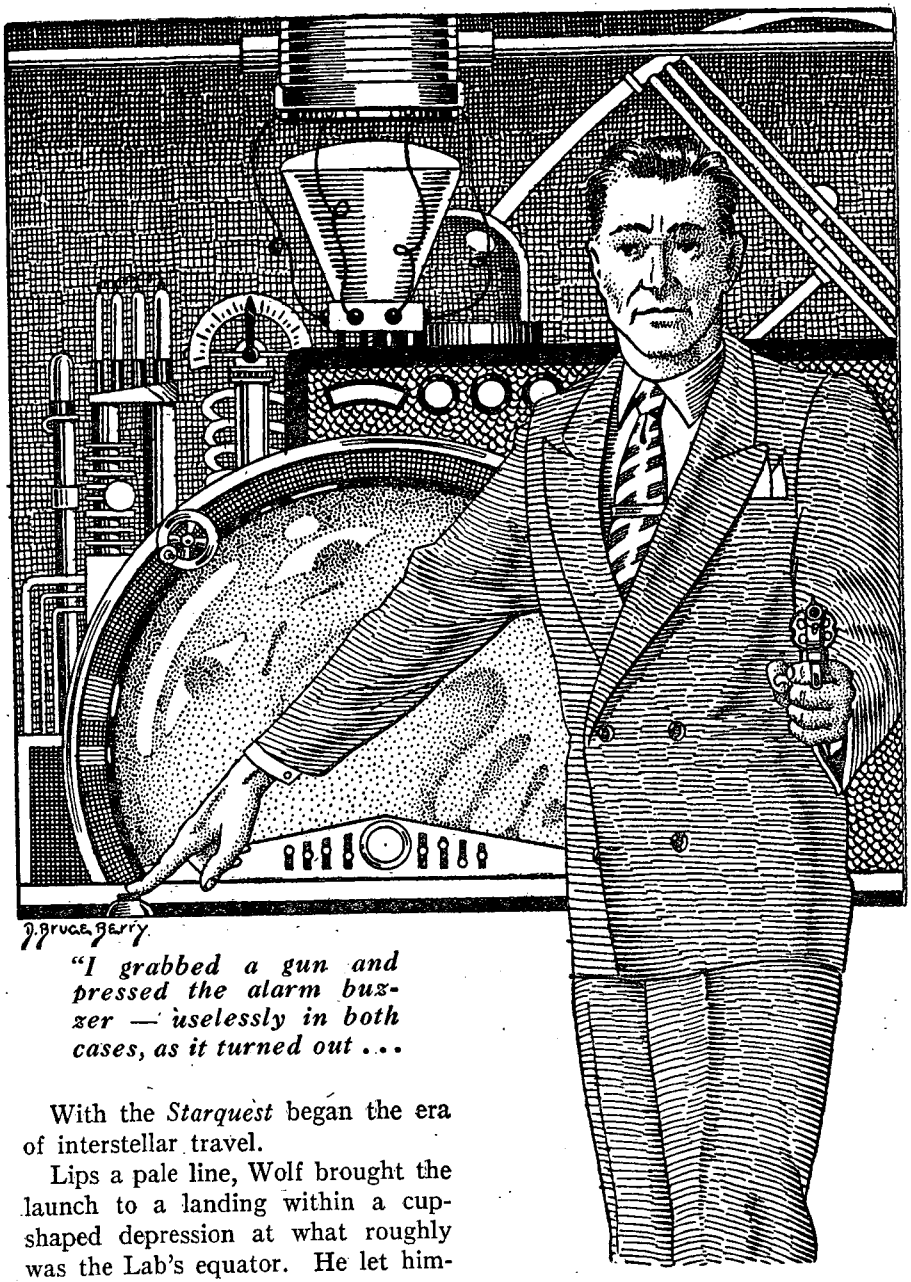

"I grabbed a gun and pressed the alarm buzzer — uselessly in both cases, as it turned out . . .

With the *Starquest* began the era of interstellar travel.

Lips a pale line, Wolf brought the launch to a landing within a cup-shaped depression at what roughly was the Lab's equator. He let him-

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self out of the airlock, made his way swiftly across the dozen or so meters that separated him from the huge cave opening leading down into the living quarters at the heart of the worldlet.

As he reached the interior of the cave he discovered the first clue to the disaster that had occurred. For the *Starquest* had been berthed within the cave during the installation of the *Hyperdrive* generators which old Carl Vierling had conceived and designed, and which Wolf and Arn had helped build. And the *Starquest* was gone.

Gone! Wolf halted, stunned. He stared wildly at the empty space the craft had occupied, a chill numbness gripping his body. Then thought of Arn and Carl Vierling rose starkly in his mind, and in another moment he was running recklessly toward the airlock at the other end of the long cave, which gave entrance to the living quarters within the Lab.

Ruin met him — and death. The airlock valves had been blasted open, and the rooms immediately beyond scarred by explosives and blistered by rays. Sprawled at intervals along a line of retreat were the figures of the three technicians who had assisted with the work on the *Starquest*, their space armor shattered and ray-blackened. It was clear they had put up a stiff fight before going down under the weight of superior numbers.

Wolf paused a moment, looking down at the fallen men in silent tribute. He had worked wth them and liked them. Their deaths were not easy to accept — nor, Wolf vowed fiercely, would they be forgotten.

His pulses drummed with fearful expectancy as he hurried on. What of Arn and old Carl? Were they dead, too?

The emergency seals had gone on at the entrances to the rooms further back, and there was air and warmth. The living section — recreation room, sleeping quarters and kitchen — was deserted of life and undisturbed. Only the machine shop and laboratory now remained, and Wolf increased his already frantic pace.

He reached the huge chamber with its clutter of technical equipment and scientific apparatus. There was air and warmth here, also. And foreboding stillness.

Wolf found Carl Vierling lying in a limp huddle at the base of a workbench, his iron-gray hair matted with blood. Of Arn there was no sign.

Certain that he was once more in the presence of death, Wolf bent slowly over the old man's motionless form, grief a constriction in his throat. But as he carefully lifted the gray head, there was a flutter of eyelids, a stirring of limbs. Old Carl still lived! Relief surging in him, Wolf began removing his armor.

HIS gray head bandaged and his elderly features haggard with despair, Carl Vierling sat in the kitchen, staring into a cup of black

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coffee, heavily laced with Venusian brandy. Ben Wolf paced the floor nearby, trailing clouds of aromatic smoke from the pipe gripped savagely between his teeth. His muscular figure moved with the unspent power and vitality of a caged animal, exuding an aura of thwarted fury.

Abruptly Wolf swung around to face the older man. "Those men you told me you saw, Carl, can't you describe them at all?"

Vierling shook his head. "It happened too fast. I didn't know what was going on until too late. The air was gone from the rooms around the airlock, and the sound of the fight didn't carry to the shop. I heard the detector alarm, of course, but I assumed it was you, Ben, as it appears Arn did also. Nothing had happened for so long, I guess we forgot to be careful.

"When the raiders came crowding through the shop door, I was too surprised to be observing. They were wearing space armor, but I did notice that they were strangers. I grabbed a gun and pressed the alarm buzzer . . . uselessly in both cases. Then one of them fired at me. The shot grazed my head, and I went down. I guess they thought they had finished me off."

Vierling sipped at his coffee and shook his head again. "For an instant I had the idea that the raiders were our own crew. The boys had gone out to do some work on the hull of the *Starquest*, and had put on space armor. They must have seen the raiders appear at the mouth of the cavern, which is why they retreated into the Lab airlock. But I suppose things happened too fast from there on."

Wolf threw out his hands. "This is a maddening situation, Carl! Three men dead, Arn kidnapped, the *Starquest* stolen — and not a single clue to the person behind it! We have to get Arn and the ship back— but where to start?"

Wolf puffed abstractedly at his pipe, his amber eyes narrowed under copper-hued brows. "One thing is clear, though. The person who engineered the raid on the Lab was in a position both to learn of my trips to Titan and to act on that knowledge. This person obviously has a gang behind him, for the attack on the Lab was the work of experienced fighters."

"One of the hijack chiefs, it would seem," Vierling suggested.

"I'm not so certain about that," Wolf replied slowly. "My purchases on Titan told nothing about the *Starquest*. There was nothing to indicate that an attack on the Lab would be profitable. The only motive for the attack, therefore, could have been to satisfy a personal curiosity — or a personal spite. And the only person I can think of who would go against me for that reason is Hunk Palio."

"Hunk Palio — and Luree!" Vierling exclaimed, rising to his feet in excitement. "Of course, Ben! Information of all sorts sooner or

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later reaches Luree. Palio could easily have learned of your trips to Titan — and decided to see what you were up to."

Wolf nodded grimly. "Palio hates my guts. He'd act on a long chance if he thought it would give him an advantage over me. If the *Starquest* has actually fallen into his hands, it's the worst thing that could possibly happen. Palio's insanely ambitious. With our Hyperdrive to back him up, he'll be able to rule all space. Nobody will be able to touch him."

Wolf clenched his hands, his features bleakly set. "I've got to go to Luree, Carl. If Palio has the *Starquest* — and Arn — he must be stopped from going any further."

"But it's suicide!" Vierling said in swift protest. "You wouldn't have a chance against Palio and his killers."

THE luscious female with the green-tinted hair and the clinging strapless gown leaned precariously over the back of Hunk Palio's big desk chair. Outside the one-way vision glass of the office wall swirled what, at first glance, might be taken for the last word in sybaritic living. With closer study, it would have been seen as one of the most vicious dives in all the seventeen colonial worlds.

"Hunk," sugared the girl in the green hair-do, "what was that big ship the boys brought in last night? Everybody acts mysterious when I try to find out what happened."

Hunk Palio was a little drunk on *negus*. Otherwise he would have cuffed her for being so nosey.

"It's the biggest job I ever pulled off, that crate, baby. You'll find out soon enough. So will the rest of the jerks that think they can push Hunk Palio around. No more, baby! I'm top dog, now?"

The green-haired "baby" patted his dark, bristly cheek. "That's the stuff, Hunk. Show 'em who's boss."

Palio pushed himself away from the littered desk, lit a cigar and stood up. He pushed one thick, stubby finger against her pert nose.

"Just remember that ship is a secret, Janie. If anybody asks questions about it, I want to know. We may have spies here, on Luree, and I'll pay a bonus if you turn them up. String along with me, baby — we're in the top orbits, now."

A nasty glitter showed for an instant in his deep-set black eyes. A command — and a warning. Then he turned and strode heavily out of the office where he could sit and watch the whole of the big salon outside without himself being seen. Janie watched his bulky figure on the short, powerful legs, and a hidden abhorrence flickered into her long-lashed gray eyes. After a moment she left the office also, to stand by the glassite wall of the ornate dine-and-dance part of the observation dome which stretched over the huge structure.

Luree had once been planned for a

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kind of deluxe astrophysical laboratory, long before the space gangs had broken up the tenuous fabric of government trying to establish itself across the void that separated the seventeen colonies. Where Janie stood, you could look out and see the vast carpet of glowing, turning magical circles that added themselves together to make up the rings of Saturn. Seen this close, the rings were awe-inspiring. The builders of Luree — as Hunk Palio had named the place after he took over, Luree being his idea of poetry and expressing his concept of a proper name for a sucker-trap — had planned the big dome so the best rooms of the vast place were against the glassite outer wall.

The pirates had long since killed off the original scientific staff of the Nio observatory. Hunk was its third owner, the others having died by violence. It had been a long twenty years since the pirates had gotten hold of superior weapons and faster ships and blasted the feeble beginning of the Interplanetary Police Patrol almost out of existence. They still existed, however, and had a few ships, but everyone knew the IP was under the gang's central offices.

Nobody ruled the gangs, really. Not yet. But to operate efficiently, they had established a joint central office and organization for fair distribution of information. It was called, jocularly, "Missions, Inc." The "missions" were pirate raids, involving mass murder and wholesale appropriation of goods, and often meant the establishment of another stronghold in the gang network.

"Missions" had a branch office in each big colonial city, but the main office of correlation of data and disposal of portable goods was on Earth, in good old New York. Each gang had its own area of space, received information useful in its particular area, and hence supported Missions, Inc. There were arguments, true, but on the whole the system worked. The IP was a useless figurehead, for the central office of Missions, Inc. ruled space.

The rings of Saturn are only about ten miles thick, but it's a deadly ten miles to jet a ship through. A lot of stuff circles the big world, including the planetoid on which the big glassite dome of Luree had been built. This planetoid, Nio, was not one of Saturn's moons, but an outer fragment of the rings, little more than a big rough rock of huge size.

JANIE of the green-dyed hair watched the vast carpet of glowing dust, studded with the varicolored round flowers that marked the larger chunks of rock in the rings. Each rock had its own little ring of fluorescing rock dust, which made the rings of Saturn the most beautiful sight in all space. The rings were one reason for Luree's steady trade. Every space tourist "just had to see the rings of Saturn." Hunk Palio had grabbed off the big dome that circled the rings at just the

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right distance to observe the phenomena at its best — and turned it into a tourist resort with red-light attachments. Janie was one of the attachments. She didn't have any choice in the matter, as everybody in the colonies did what the gangs told them to do.

Janie was only twenty-five, and she had spent seven of those years in abject servitude right here, on Nio. She often wondered how it would feel to be free and have a real home to go to. She had never had one.

Aside from gambling, exotic foods, liquors and narcotics, women were the stock in trade on Luree — and Hunk Palio saw to it that they cost his customers plenty. It was mainly for this reason that Palio was becoming recognized as the most powerful of the gang bosses. The IP had long been forced to wink at every depredation connected with Palio's name — had to, or be wiped out. For Palio could call down upon them more and better fighting ships than the IP dreamed of possessing.

A customer, a large, paunchy man with a red nose, moved into tentative position beside Janie. Absently she pulled the little gun-like device from the jeweled holster on her hip and sprayed the ray from its muzzle upon the plump countenance of the newcomer. His color changed from doughy white to dull red, and his big flabby hand went to her shoulder. He smiled, displaying a mouthful of expensive dental work. Janie hated him, but smiled affectionately.

"What's your name, big boy?"

"Will Mather's my label, beautiful. What's yours? Do you work here, or are you just a visitor admiring the scenery?"

"As if you didn't know!" Janie retorted. "Only girls that work here have the Afdar ray. Do you like the effect?"

"It sure puts ginger into the old carcass!" the man said enthusiastically. "Makes me feel like a two-year-old. But what is the idea of using it on customers?"

"It's supposed to make them feel generous. Can you afford the tariff?"

Janie was a little doubtful. Somehow he looked like a family man, and her take was down, this week. She knew what happened to little girls who didn't bring in the shekels. They were sent places — places she hoped she wouldn't have to go for a long time yet. She didn't want to waste her time on a sucker who would go running off to his wife instead of getting down to business.

The man laughed, a rich hee-haw, as if it were ridiculous to suggest there existed anything he couldn't afford. Janie knew exactly what that meant — she'd heard it before. It meant he'd already spent more than he had expected to spend. She smiled and ducked under his arm, moving off along the glassite wall and watching the crowd for a more likely prospect.

And then she saw Arn Vierling. *Arn Vierling* — here!

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Her mind went back seven years, to the time when she was a little fool trying to break into show business. Arn was a successful actress, then. Janie had read the papers avidly when Arn married the famous Ray Vierling, inventor of the deadly Vierling ray. That ray was now used on every ship in space and carried on the hip of every hoodlum who liked to think of himself as a killer.

Arn looked different, and Janie wondered what the other had been doing to herself. You would think she was disguised. She was thinner, her lovely profile sharply etched instead of softly beautiful, her eyebrows mere pencil-lines instead of the dark bars that were almost a trademark of Arn's. It must be her — yet . . .

JANIE moved up beside her, drawn by an attraction compounded of curiosity, admiration and the old childish worship of the successful stage star. She sat at a little table near the corner of the huge bar.

In a whisper that couldn't have been heard two feet away, Janie said, "Hello, trouper, don't tell me you're incognito?"

Janie's voice was hesitant. She'd met Arn only twice, and it was likely the woman wouldn't remember her. But she needn't have worried. The long, bare lovely arm lifted and gracefully tugged her closer with an odd gesture of familiarity, as though Janie were in truth an old friend. The deep, thrilling voice that millions had listened to, murmured in a stage whisper that could have been heard half across the huge barroom.

"Do sit down and be sociable. I'm lonesome."

Janie bent closer, a kind of fright rising in her at being so close. The thrilling voice was almost inaudible in her ear now.

"If you recognize me, don't give me away, you little fox! I'm here on business, and I'm nobody you know."

Then her voice raised again, that infinitely beguiling voice that could change so subtly, become softly intimate or coldly hostile.

"So you're an entertainer in this delightful" — the voice sank again to a murmur you couldn't have understood two feet away — "bordello! Now act like you never saw me before."

The voice went up again, for the benefit of the audience craning at the two beautiful women. "This is really the most delightful" — her voice slid down again — "dive I ever got into. I hope I get out alive! How do you put up with it?"

Janie let her own voice out for the benefit of the milling customers, engineers from Titan's mines, construction men from the boom towns on Rhea, crewmen from the big space docks on Iapetus, mechanics from the factories on Callisto, tourists, spaceship officers.

"Luree gives the most magnificent view of the rings to be had anywhere

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on the moons." Her own voice sank to a whisper. "And believe me, I'm sick and tired of looking at them! Don't worry, I won't give you away. I hate this place and everyone in it. If you need my help —"

The long, graceful arm came out and almost fiercely pulled her closer. Arn hissed, "Is it here — the ship?"

Janie nodded, and Arn went on, "Tell me what you can about it, where it is and what Palio plans to do with it. This is important — horribly important!"

Her voice raised. "I want you to tell me all about this wonderful spa of the stars, honey! It's really the most fascinating . . ."

THE gangs were ruled by chieftains who had won office as the result of superior intelligence, superior fighting prowess, or a combination of both. Each gang was for the most part an independent organization, though here and there the smaller and weaker gangs had banded together for their mutual benefit. The advantages of a union on an even greater scale were generally realized. A few attempts had been made to unite the gang under one leadership — unsuccessful attempts, for the proud and lawless spirit of the hijackers was not to be easily fettered by order and routine. Enormous wealth, enormous power awaited the man who could accomplish it. But that man would have to have what the others did not. The most important requirements were faster ships, better weapons.

Janie of the green-tinted hair thought of this as she watched the awe-inspiring spectacle of the rings beyond the observation dome. Behind her soft doll-like face was a shrewd mind that few suspected.

Faster ships? Was the mysterious craft that had just come into Hunk Palio's possession the answer to that? Time alone would tell. But she knew of the vast ambitions that burned in the man's apish body. Palio liked to think of himself as the emperor of the gangs, controlling the rich tides of commerce that flowed between Saturn and Jupiter, waxing fat on the unending stream of tributes and levies that poured in.

It was as an important step toward the fulfillment of those ambitions, Janie knew, that Palio had established Luree as a pleasure resort. For by not directly competing in the hijack activities of the other gang chieftains, Palio won friends where he might have made enemies. And thus Nio — the planetoid-sized outer fragment of Saturn's rings on which Luree was situated — became neutral ground. The various chieftains and their underlings could visit Luree without fear of attack by rival gangs. Palio's "diplomatic corps" — suave bouncers, carefully trained for their duties — saw to that. And Palio's fighting crews were constantly on the ready for those who might seek to pluck the rich prize that was Luree.

Luree was the bright bait that Palio dangled before the gang chief-

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tains. Luree catered to every whim, every desire and vice, from gambling to petal-fleshed houris, strong liquors and exotic foods to narcotics as vicious as Venusian *cafji* smoke. The chieftains came, saw—were subtly conquered. In his role as an ingratiatingly considerate host, Palio learned of their strengths and weaknesses, their enmities and ambitions. This information was carefully recorded, added to and altered, against the time when it would be of use. When Palio finally was ready to shift from guile to force, he would know exactly what type of force to apply and exactly where to apply it.

Jane realized that Palio's crafty schemes had an excellent chance of success. The thought filled her with an emotion akin to horror. Nothing worse could possibly happen than that Palio's control should be extended beyond Nio and to the ring-worldlets and satellites of Saturn. Palio was evil. He spread rottenness through everything he touched. No one could know that better than a person who had been a part of Luree as long as Janie had.

And once, she thought bitterly, she had considered Luree a glamorous and romantic place. She knew better now. She knew of the lives wrecked by gambling and drugs, of the slavery that existed here, of the misery and lost hope, the depravity and viciousness lurking beneath the surface. She would have liked nothing better than to destroy Luree — and Palio with it. Especially Palio. If her chance ever came —

A man appeared suddenly, close beside her, slipping an arm with sly familiarity about her waist. He had approached with a quiet stealth that was somehow in keeping with his narrow foxy face and close-set eyes.

"What are you doing, Janie, admiring the scenery?"

She twisted aside, startled, and then angry. "Oh, it's you, Shiv. How many times have I told you to keep your paws off me?"

"Aw, why can't you be nice, Janie?"

"Ask Hunk that question. You may be his right hand man, but that's no excuse to get fresh."

"Why should he care?" Shiv demanded sullenly. "You ain't Hunk's woman. You ought to know the only reason he keeps you around is because you're good at helping run things, here. You know, Palio went out on a job to take Ben Wolf's gal, that blonde Vierling woman. But he got something worth a lot more to him. But you wouldn't know . . . "

Janie hid her sudden excitement. She saw she would have to handle Shiv just right if she were to get any more information out of him. The worried expression on his foxy face showed he had revealed more than he had intended to.

She flipped one slim hand in a scornful gesture. "I know your cheap tricks, Shiv, so don't try to run my temperature up. I heard a rumor about the ship, but this blonde angle is carrying things too far."

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"That ship's something different, Janie. There's nothing like it in all space."

"Where have I heard that before?" Janie murmured. "Next thing I know, Shiv, you're going to tell me this mysterious blonde is right here, in Luree."

"No, she didn't happen to be around. But the blonde's a friend of Ben Wolf. Wolf wasn't around when the boys grabbed the crate. They made sure he wouldn't be, because this Ben Wolf is tough and full of tricks. I happen to know he's the one guy Hunk really worries about. Anyhow, the boys brought back the fastest ship in existence — and Palio will get that blonde eventually, you know how he is. Just to get even with Ben, if for no other reason. So you better be friends with Shiv, girl. He won't have any use for you when he gets her."

Janie fought to control a strange weakness that had rushed over her. She kept her voice casual. "Ben Wolf? Isn't he the guy who used to be a big shot hijacker before he got a rush of science to the head, or something like that? This was before Hunk took over Luree."

Shiv nodded. "Hunk never got anywhere until Ben Wolf pulled out of the racket. Wolf made him look like a monkey plenty of times, and Hunk ain't ever forgotten. That's one reason why he had the boys grab that ship. Wolf gave up hijacking to work on that ship, Janie. Now Hunk's evened up the score."

"Oh, my!" Janie felt as if her heart had dropped right out of her, but she put her hands to her head in mock bewilderment. "This is all too complicated for poor little me. I'm going to have a drink and forget the fairy tale you just told me, Shiv."

The fox-faced man caught at her arm. His close-set eyes were eager. "Don't I get something for telling you, Janie? Every word of it's on the level."

"You'll get a hole in your head if you don't keep your paws where they belong! You didn't tell me anything I should owe you for."

Shiv anxiously caught up with her as she turned away. "Listen, Janie, don't tell anybody what I just said. If Hunk finds out I talked, there'll be trouble. He doesn't want a word to leak out to Ben Wolf."

"Why should I tell anybody what I don't believe myself?" Janie asked scornfully. She hurried away, leaving Shiv to stare after her, worried, disappointed and angry.

Shiv Fraddin realized he had been a dope to reveal anything to Janie. He had dimly hoped to win her over, but she had proved as elusive as always. If she talked, Hunk Palio would know who had spilled the beans. And Shiv didn't want any trouble with Hunk — not when his plans for double-crossing Hunk and taking over Luree were just getting under way. Shiv knew he had to get more of Hunk's underlings over on his side before he would have a

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fighting chance. Hunk was no push-over.

Something would have to be done about Janie. Shiv Fraddin decided to take care of that right away. He would have to be subtle — but he was good at that. He could easily make it look as if some miner, half crazy from *cafji* smoke, had done her in . . .

PUFFING on his cigar, Hunk Palio strode leisurely through the vast dining hall of Luree. This hall was shaped like a shallow bowl, with tiers of tables rising on all sides from a gleaming dance floor at the bottom. Nearly all the tables were occupied, many with opaque light curtains switched on to afford privacy to the diners. Couples swayed sinuously on the dance floor to the undulant minor-key wailing of a Venusian band.

Palio waved his thick paw jovially as a number of the diners called out to him, pausing at several tables to exchange a few words. In this manner he proceeded through the dining room and into the cavernous gaming hall, beyond, where avid-faced crowds pressed about the gaming tables or stood at the vast semi-circular bar. The whir and clatter of gaming devices was drowned in the polyglot babble of half a hundred different tongues as men of the various races of Earth strove with white-skinned Venusians and furred Martians to make themselves heard above the din. Here flamboyantly garbed hijackers and their painted women rubbed elbows with roughly dressed miners and uniformed spacemen with radiation-scarred faces, engineers and mechanics mingled with arrogant ranchers and lordly plantation owners. All were motes in the vast tides of trade that flowed between the satellites of Jupiter and Saturn, drawn by the manifold attractions of Luree, emptying their wealth with fevered abandon into the coffers of Hunk Palio.

And Hunk Palio listened to the pleasant tinkle of incoming riches, even as his black eyes darted about to see that his suavely impassive housemen and scanty-gowned hostesses were on the job. But actually his thoughts were elsewhere.

Maybe it was because he had met so few women like her in his lifetime. She was tall and pliantly slender, yet curved like a sculptured goddess, her luxuriant blonde hair framing a delicate oval face made vivid by full red lips and dark violet eyes. But she had more than physical loveliness. She had class . . . The word embraced qualities Palio had rarely encountered in women—intelligence, refinement, grace, poise. Those very qualities, so foreign to his experience, set his blood on fire. The blonde was something special, something off the beaten track.

Palio needed the blonde for the information stored in her beautiful head—but why stop there? he asked himself. His breathing quickened. Palio needed that information if the

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ship was to be of any use to him. He had gotten wind of the craft through purchases made on Titan by Ben Wolf—purchases that were supposed to have been secret. But in Luree Palio had the roots of a grapevine through which the news of all the seventeen colonial worlds eventually flowed. His hostesses had been trained to milk important facts from drunken clerks, engineers and spacemen.

Ben Wolf's purchases had borne out rumors that he was engaged in some project of a scientific nature. Knowing Ben Wolfe, Palio had realized that the man never wasted time in minor pursuits. The stakes were always high in any game Ben Wolf played. So Palio had decided to investigate. He'd had Ben Wolf followed from Titan to a certain worldlet in Saturn's rings—and then he'd laid his plans. The result had been the ship. The blonde, he'd missed—

She was Ben Wolf's girl. Through her, Palio told himself, he could strike directly at Wolf. Palio had hated Wolf ever since the days when he had been only a minor hijack chieftain and Wolf had dominated the racket with his greater cleverness and daring. Palio had been made to look like a monkey more than once—and he hadn't forgotten. Now it was in his power to even the score twice over.

Grinding underfoot the butt of his cigar, he strode deliberately from the gambling salon.

BEN Wolf's eyes were twin flames of anger, as he and the old inventor completed their move from the ruined "Lab" on the rock to another rock, nearer to Nio, where they could watch the activities of the Palio gang with a scope across some four hundred miles of glowing space.

"We've got to get the ship back, Carl! You know the IP can't and won't go up against Luree. And with our drive, Hunk Palio and his murderers will rule all space. They'll be Emperors of the most evil era in history, unless we find a way to get that ship. No one will be able to touch them!"

Vierling shook his head. "It's an impossible thing, Ben. We couldn't oppose the gangs before, how do you expect to do it now they have the best drive in existence? Sure, I know we've got to try. But it's suicide, however you look at it."

Ben swung the scope on its gymbals, and old Carl turned up the projector. The wall screens lit up with a view of the surface of Nio, the planetoid where Luree's dome had been built. This place, where Ben and old Carl had moved, was Vierling's own private hideaway, burrowed out of the rock, equipped with luxurious living quarters, the big scope, and a small workshop where he tinkered with his inventions. They were trusting that Hunk did not know its location, as they had always been at pains to keep it secret. Carl moved the focus closer, to a view of the launching pits on Nio, hun-

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dreds of miles away across the rings. Nio was at its closest approach to their position. Luree was on the other side of the satellite. This was Palio's back door, the side the suckers never got to see, where his ships took off on raids and brought in the loot. It was also the place where the fruit of long years of toil on the part of Ben Wolf, Carl Vierling, and the four others now dead, had been taken.

Arn Vierling came in, her features flushed and her eyes sparkling. Both men stared at her in stunned inaction a moment, then eagerly hurried in her direction. Vierling clasped her in his arms and said: "Arn, you're all right."

Arn said, "I've just come from Luree. The ship is still there."

"I thought you were a captive!" exclaimed Ben.

"No, I hid while the gang was here. I took the little life-raft and followed them, to learn who they were. In Luree, I acted like a customer-tourist, met a hostess I used to know on the stage. She told me."

The old man motioned to the scurrying figures about the pits, where two great hulls were moving slowly out to aunching position from the wide doors of the shops. He growled, "There go two more raiders, now. Loaded with non-standard ray, a hundred extra gun ports built into her sides The IP hasn't a thing like them."

Vierling ran his fingers through his hair, his features mirroring hopelessness. "What can we do? There's no way to get back anything that falls into Palio's hands."

Arn swore suddenly, which was unusual with her. "Damn them! A few more months, and they'll be able to take over Earth itself!"

Ben turned the knob on the scope, and the focus moved closer. They could see the tiny figures on the black rocks, loading another squat gray hull with tools of death and readying it for space.

His voice steady and decided, Ben said, "If we had the Starquest, we could clean Palio out. I am going to try to steal her back. I am going to try to get into her, there in the shops."

Arn Vierling leaned forward; her face suddenly intense. "You're needed here, Ben! I'll go. I can get in easy—as I just proved. I mingled with the customers when they came out for a look around outside the dome, then wandered in with them. Nobody knew I didn't come in on one of the tourist ships. And nobody paid any attention to me."

Ben shook his head. "It's no job for a woman, Arn. You'd have to kill guards—rough work even for a killer. Carl couldn't do it. I've *got* to do it!"

Arn's expression was stubborn. "If there's any way to get that ship, I'm the one to make it succeed. You and Dad wouldn't have a chance."

Gloomily Ben turned the knob, watching the scene shimmer and go out. "They'll spot you in time, Arn. Do you think any man would ever

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forget your face, once he saw it?"

Arn laughed, a rich bold laugh. On the stage, that laugh had thrilled the world, and it was thrilling, now.

"A lot you know about women! Why, I can get Hunk Palio to show me that ship himself, if I want to!"

Vierling said, "Ben's right, Arn. They'll spot you if you go back. You're too striking to mix in a crowd like that. They're probably asking what became of you, right now—trying to figure out who you were and where you went."

Ben added, "Arn Vierling's face is as familiar as the Vierling gun to those criminals. You can't make it, Arn! They'll know who you are. They know Vierling was financing this ship by now. They must have known who he was when they thought they killed him."

Arn set her beautiful jaw. "You two may have cold feet—but you're not giving them to me! Don't forget I'm an actress, one of the best. With a different hair-do and makeup, you'd pass me on the street yourself. I'm going—and that's final!"

The two men stood silent. Ben wished there was some hope, wished this sacrifice didn't have to be made. Loving Arn, he could not bear the thought of her loss. There had already been too much death among them . . .

They had been seven in the beginning. Now they were but three, old Carl Vierling, with his shock of white hair and worried ruddy face—Arn, his acquired daughter, and Ben Wolf, the one-time hi-jack chief turned from his former way of life by the influence of Arn and the savant—and the possibility of decent law inherent in the power of the new drive.

It had been a whim of Vierling's to build his shops and his home on different rocks of the rings—a whim with plenty of sense behind it. For the gangs had taken his Vierling weapon ray factories over, on Earth—and he had learned by bitter experience that only by perfect concealment could his inventions be kept out of the hands of lawless man. Now they had taken his greatest achievement from him, and it was a bitter and despairing man who faced Ben across the scope.

This "home" was an ideal shelter, for from the surface there was no sign of the chambers beneath. There was a fine view of Luree, an accident they now found might prove of some use. Nio passed the rock in which they hid frequently, as the one was retrograde in motion to the rings, and the other circled with the rings. The hideout had plenty of room, supplies were kept in plentiful amounts — and Vierling's workshop was in reality a well-equipped laboratory. But they both regretted giving up the big shop where they had built the *Starquest* through the last three years of hermit-like concealment, of impossibly demanding ruses and dodges to keep their purpose from general knowledge. There was also in one of the big rock cham-

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bers a small three passenger model of the *Starquest,* the first experimental construction in which the new vortex hyper-drive had proven practical.

It was decided that Ben was to take Arn with him to Nio, and the two made their preparations. There was no longer any reason to conceal the drive; the gangs already had it. They might need its superior speed, so they took the little model which had been the pattern for the big *Starquest.*

Finally the little ship moved quietly away from the hide-out, the rock dust of the ring fluorescing faintly ahead where the vortices gripped the nothingness, drawing them on. Inside, Arn watched Ben handle the ship, making sure she knew just how. She might have to pilot the big *Starquest,* if she managed to get into it, on Nio.

The satellite was at its closest. There was little more than four hundred miles of glowing emptiness to cross, and shortly they settled down in the black rock shadows at a safe distance from the big dome of Luree.

"How did you get inside the place, before, Arn?" asked Ben. He shivered slightly, and fingered the little acid gun old Carl had given him just before they left. It was an invention he had never tried to market, because it was the last word in frightfulness. The thing was in a holster under his arm, an unfamiliar shape, very different from the snub-nosed Vierling rays used generally.

Arn rubbed her fishbowl with anti-condensation fluid, her beautiful face grim. "Just mix with a bunch of tourists. You'll see them jumping around, having fun with the lack of gravity. When they go back into the dome, go in with them. That way there's no questions to answer. Once in, stay where you can see me and follow my lead. That is, unless you get some ideas of your own. And stay away from Hunk Palio's hostesses, you hear!"

Setting their fishbowls in place, they let themselves out of the ship. They moved in long leaps toward the distant glow of lights within the great dome ahead.

BEN Wolf had been five years away from this atmosphere of lusty and lustful merrymaking, behind which he knew only too well hid the merciless figures of Palio's henchmen—as ruthless a gang as any in space. Now, he found he felt out of place, did not know how to act to remain inconspicuous. It was this caused his first mistake. He moved with the crowd to the bar and downed a couple of quick shots to give the impression of a thirsty man out to acquire a good shine.

He knew, but had forgotten, that sobriety was not tolerated on Luree's crowded floors, except among the employees. He had forgotten that all newcomers first drinks were spiked with drugs, to put a sober and cautious man into a liberal frame of

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mind. The drugs had the quality, certain as death, of causing hiatus during which even a tightwad could be separated quickly from his dough.

So Ben Wolf, would-be out-smarter of the toughest gang in space, found himself looking about him with eyes behind which the mind was not only out of order, but full of a sudden new will toward enjoying what the occasion might offer in entertainment.

A green-haired hostess turned from the dice room doorway to look over the crowd. She wore a little toy gun in a jewelled holster on one sleek hip, and seeing Ben's flushed face, she recognized the condition, new to Ben, old stuff to her. She pulled the toy-gun, pointed it, and he felt the sudden ecstatic shock of strange vibration, arousing in his numbed mind an unholy desire for the green-haired houri. Which was exactly the purpose of the "toy," an ancient instrument built by the Afdar cult of Venus, forbidden by Earth-law.

The hostess moved off, confident of her victim's pursuit. Ben followed, staggering a little, and caught up with her as she seemed to attempt to escape from him into the throng. As he stumbled into her, she smiled widely at his clumsiness, and seized his arm in an unexpectedly firm grasp. Her urgent voice in his ear sobered him for an instant, drove away the clouds from his mind.

"You fool, if anyone recognizes you! Now pretend you're trying to make me, and maybe I can help you."

Ben stood paralyzed. "Who are you? How do you know me?" he asked, trying desperately to recapture his drugged wits.

Vaguely, then, a chill remembrance of his position here seeped into his consciousness. Hunk himself would recognize him if he ran into him—and others of the gang must know him by reputation, if not by sight.

She led him along the wall, as if she had only paused for a word with a persistent customer, and Ben followed, half a step behind.

A stairway came out upon a narrow gallery, leading around the upper part of the huge dome, a breathless height above the transparent ceilings below.

Overhead the monstrous glow of Saturn hung, a great mottled belt about its middle, blood-orange and milk-white. Ben, always struck with awe at close sight of the rings, watched the complex movements, dark specks and twirling circles against the brighter glow of the rings. He knew each speck would seem big as a mountain on closer view. But here, on Nio, the rings were an immense carpet of fire decorated with fragile flowers of flame.

The green-haired girl was leaning against the glassite of the dome, her eyes on his searchingly. She was inviting lipped, her red mouth parted, her body as perfect even as Arn's, Ben's usual standard of comparison. His tongue was thick in his mouth as he strove to question her, but she

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cut him off.

"Why did you come here, Ben Wolf? Do you want to make it easier for Palio to kill you? Don't you realize the gang doesn't want the knowledge of that drive in anyone else's hands?

"Did Arn tell you?" mumbled Ben, trying desperately to reassemble his faculties, to get it straight in his mind. He still couldn't understand easily, his mind numb.

"She didn't have to tell me! But I-knew Arn, years ago, in show-business. I know you came here in a desperate try to get back that ship. But to me it doesn't make sense."

Ben looked at her with anger, that a woman should think he was too incompetent to do something that had to be done. He shook his head to clear it.

She swung up the little pistol ray, the stimulating vibration splashed over his face, down his body. The thing woke him up, but it also awoke every gland in his body. He trembled with the shock of the sudden stimulation.

"Shut that off, woman. You know what it does!"

"Who'd know better? But it'll help your mind shake off the dope."

"How can I trust you? I can't trust anyone here."

"You'll have to trust me! You'll need all the help you can get. If I had any sense I'd stay a mile away from you. But I owe Hunk a score or two. I'd like to pay him off, as he's trying to do to you."

THE green haired girl's voice was going on, a kind of strained quiet little talking, half to herself. "The space gangs have turned everything in the colonies into corruption. They run everything except Earth. But now they'll be able to boss Earth, too, and there'll never come a chance to get rid of them. Girls like me, everywhere, will be slaves, too, like me. You don't know what it means to do what I have to do, do you? I wish you did. I hate the racket and everything it does to people. That's why you can trust me."

Feet clumped on the metal ladder, leading to the narrow gallery where they stood. Ben guessed this was it; he could see it on the girl's face, knew she was right. The hoods knew who he was, had spotted him when he came in. They were going to take him now, while he was up here where the customers wouldn't see the rough stuff.

Ben felt the old-time thrill, a chill flame up his back, and the last traces of his mental blackout left him in a rush of anger at the way they had taken old Vierling's life-work from him. He pulled out the acid gun the old man had given him, and moved softly over to the top of the ladder-like stair. He hated to use this weapon on *any* human being. But he would, if they made him. It was silent, swift as thought in its unbelievably fierce corrosive action—far more sure than any bullet. Old Carl had tried to explain to him what went into the creation of that ultra-

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swift acid, but he had not been able to understand. Ben was scared of the thing himself. Wherever it touched flesh, the flesh boiled away, instantly, and the utter agony of the victim made him incapable of even firing a gun in retaliation.

His mind stopped racing, settled into its accustomed cold wariness, as a face came up out of the gloom at the stair end, glowing ghoulishly in the dimness.

"What do you want?" murmured Ben, the gun steady in his hand.

The man seemed surprised, stood frozen, with only his head above the floor of the gallery. Then his voice came into the glow-lit dimness, truculent, confident of the usual frightened subservience to the powers behind him.

"I'm looking for a guy who's looking for trouble. I figure you're the one, though I never laid eyes on you before. No one else would be expecting me, with a gun in his hand."

The man had a weapon in his own hand, loosely, he had not expected to run head on into his victim, evidently. He didn't raise the gun, but just stood, waiting, watching Ben with a greedy eye, hoping to get a chance to use his weapon.

"Drop it," growled Ben, "I don't want to kill you."

"You can't pull that stuff around here, Mister." The man's eyes were unworried. "You'd better put away that water pistol and come along to see the boss. He wants to talk business and I gather you know why."

Wolf backed away a step. He didn't want to take a chance of the acid doing any splashing.

"Drop the gun, and then I'll go with you. You're the one looking for trouble." Ben hated to do it, kept mentally putting off the necessity of using the terrible acid gun. The guy was only taking orders.

"Listen, Mister, I *can't* take you in that way! He'd put me in the mines if I let a customer take my gun. Be reasonable!"

"Sorry. It's your life, you can lose it now, or later. Drop the gun!"

The weapon was a Vierling ray, from the old man's factory, now in the hands of "Missions, Inc." It was the same weapon mounted on the front of the big armored spacers, only smaller. It didn't look any smaller as the man raised it slightly, and Ben's reflex action pulled the pressure release on the acid gun. The hood's face disappeared in a silent boiling froth. Too instantly agonized even to scream, he fell out of sight down the metal ladder. Ben knew he was dead when he hit the bottom. He turned back to the girl, but she was nowhere in evidence. Well, that did it. He had to go places in a rush now, or be shot down on sight.

He moved quickly along the gallery, and he had nearly completed the circuit of the big dome when he found his green haired friend again. She stood in a little opening in the glassite which led out along the side of the dome. You couldn't go out there without a fish-globe and oxy-

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gen. She had a globe on her head and handed him one as he came up to her.

"We've got to cross the dome and get into the shops on the other side. It's a long go, you know, the shops are almost on the other side of Nio."

"You'll guide me to the ship, girl?" asked Ben, hardly able to believe it.

"If people are ever going to be free of the gangs, it'll be some woman like me who makes it possible, I suppose," she murmured, watching him attach the globe and tank to his back, hooking up the catch for him. "Why wouldn't I show you where the thing is? You'll only get killed trying to get into it. It's heavily guarded. But if you're ever going to stop it, to get the drive back before they build a thousand of them—now is the time."

BEN turned on the little tank of oxygen tucked it in the sack provided, hung it on his shoulder. He followed the woman out into the blackness where a tiny walkway ran along the curve of the dome. He wished he hadn't had to start things off this way. Arn would be left behind, now, if he did get into the ship, and he would have ruined any chance she might have had . . . but it couldn't be helped. Besides, why was he thinking he was up to anything but suicide? He was alone against hundreds.

The walk came out upon a long roof. They crossed, taking six-foot jumps, running interminably. It was several miles, he knew. They were far from the artificial grav generators now, didn't seem to weigh more than a few pounds. Endlessly the long leaps went on and on, and it seemed hours had passed when a wall jutted up from the bare rock. They leaped to the top and crossed another roof, walking along the ridge. Here they came to a higher wall, and a doorway. The girl went in, and Ben followed her, stood beside her while she dogged the airtight door. They both removed the fish-bowls, and Ben took off his shoes. He looked at the girl's sandals.

"They're sponge rubber soles," she whispered.

He followed her along the catwalk, strung through the steel triangle trusses of the roof. They were above the lights, and every so far little ladders went down to the big fluorescents; he hoped they wouldn't run into some electrician. His foot hit a projecting angle iron where the walkway was braced as it turned at a right angle. He stopped dead. He could see the workmen moving around the dozen or so hulls below. None of them looked up, and a din of hammering and the irregular sparkle of welders told him there was too much racket down there.

"There she is!" The girl stood pointing, and Ben saw the familiar rugged outline of the big ship that had been the focus of his life too many years to think about. There were only two figures near the ship,

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one at the bow, the other in front of the big air lock at center. Both had beam rifles, bulky super-powered Vierlings. Ben touched his hand to the little acid gun, feeling foolish. It wasn't much for the job ahead. The only way he could reach them from up here was from straight overhead. Could he even get in position to fire? He wondered how it was going to feel to kill a man who wasn't even looking at you.

They moved cautiously ahead. The lights below them and the heavy shadows served for excellent cover.

The racket below drowned out any sound they made. Wolf stopped the girl, whispered: "I don't even know your name, but thanks. I'll take it from here. You'd better get out of the way before the fireworks start."

He moved ahead; she stood watching him for a moment, then went swiftly back and out of sight in the gloom. Wolf crouched low as the men beneath moved about, but no one even looked up. Now he was directly overhead, and could see four more guards, grouped about the walkway that led up the slight rise from the floor of the shop. The ship was on a repair turntable, modeled after the ancient locomotive roundhouse installations. It was crazy to think he could get that hulk out of here unaided . . . it was probably already partly torn down. He quit thinking and centered himself just over the guard in front of the ship's lock, his little weapon held between his knees, sighting straight down. He squatted slowly, the sights on the man's round protective helmet — the acid might not penetrate the tough plastic that turned a bullet. He pulled the release trigger. The guard straightened, half reached up to pull off the helmet. Then the stuff got through his clothes. Ben guessed it struck into his spine below the helmet edge. He collapsed as if all his strings were cut.

BEN slid along the walk to get over the guard at the bow. The man was moving, walking on around the bow. Ben slid back to the corner of the walk, thinking there was another part of the catwalk that would take him directly over the group at the edge of the turntable. There was not. He put the little gun back in the holster, pulled himself out on the slim steel angle iron of the truss, slid along the steel precariously. His finger-tips would just reach the big blower-pipe that paralleled the truss.

The guard from the bow joined the group of four, who were talking to a fifth who had come hurriedly up the walk. Wolf knew well what he was saying. The guards looked at their rifles as the messenger talked, pulling off the safeties, checking the little dial on the stock that told the amount of energy still in the magazine of energy-capsules.

They must have just found the man he had killed on the stair. He didn't have time to wonder why it had taken so long. He crouched, teetering there on the three inch angle

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iron. He took out the acid gun, turned the little knob that spread the spray wider. With luck he could get the whole group.

Aiming carefully, he depressed the full discharge knob, pulled the release. The group froze as the acid struck. Two of them looked up at him, their faces green-white in the glare of the fluorescents, then suddenly brown with acid and then as swiftly red with the bloody boiling bubbles of the acid reaction. Two of them triggered off their rifles even as they fell screaming. The rifles fell, throwing two crashing beams of destruction out across the shops.

Even as Wolf had fired, one of the guards had turned away, to get back to the other side of the ship. Only a droplet or two had struck him, but he was screaming in terrible agony and running, throwing aside his gun, tearing off his clothes in thrashing handfuls, maddened with pain.

Wolf looked around for some way to get down and into that ship, and to get one of those ray weapons. His own little "evener" was empty, now. He laid it down on an angle iron, then on second thought scooped it up and dropped it into the open end of an empty pipe end, disconnected sometime. It would never be found there. The space gangs didn't have that one, yet. Better if they never did. That's the way old Carl wanted it.

A floor pillar beside the turntable came up near him. The pillar was a cross braced girder. Wolf leaped across the space, banged up against it hard, gripping the cross braces. Gravity still wasn't normal, probably about half, to make the work easier. He shinned down the long beam, holding the sides between his hands, not using the braces. He landed in a crouch, scuttled across the littered table floor, grabbed up a rifle. The stench from the steaming bodies was nostril-corroding. He scuttled on around the bow where he stumbled over the body of the man who had ran. He was still moaning, his body arching and racking in agony. Wolf triggered the powerful rifle into his head, letting the brains out on the floor. He didn't look at the mess, but raced on to the big round lock in the side of the ship, a fierce exultation in besting the gang his only emotion.

He heaved on the opening lever. It gave. The door should have swung open, but it didn't! Wolf stood, numbed by the fact, staring at the rims of the door. After a long second, he saw the little tack-welds circling the door. They weren't taking any chances. It was welded shut till the experts arrived to examine her and draw up plans for construction of a number of new drives. Wolf spun the knob on the big rifle to quarter strength, stood back, tried the beam on the bottom weld.

Metal flew, sparkling and glowing. He was nearly blinded by the red hot sparks. He spun the dial on around to nearly off, and touched

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the beam to the next weld. The soft welding melted swiftly, and he went around the door rapidly. The heavy dura-steel of the door was not affected, being built to turn far heavier destructive force than one Vierling rifle.

Even as he tugged the big disc open, he heard cries from the far side, the pound of running feet. A beam slashed against the door as he ducked behind the dura-steel disk. Bits of the tack-weld metal flew in a shower of molten iron. Ben slammed the door shut, fastened the space-safety. They couldn't open her from outside now, not till he was under weigh.

WOLF dropped the rifle, tugged open the inner lock door, slammed it shut and levered over the main dog, letting the rest of the fastenings wait. His feet hammered along the companionway as he raced for the pilot's seat in the bridge-room. He hoped they wouldn't think to try to get him from the nose. The glassite view plate there might not turn a full-strength Vierling beam. He didn't think they could fire into the nose unless they climbed up into the roof girders, but he wasn't waiting to find out.

Ben gave one look out the oval view-plate, but there was nothing to be seen but the stretches of roof girders. He pulled back the vortex heater switch, depressed the master switch that started the dynamos turning. He counted ten, slowly, then pulled the lift lever.

He ducked as the roof crashed into bits. The crack and scream of rending girders and roof plastic, the hammering of torn materials mingled with the blasting thuds of rifle beams slamming into the hull near the nose. The racket was deafening as he pulled the lift lever all the way back. The nose vortex pulled the ship around on its tail, jerked her out into space. It left Ben Wolf unconscious on the wall at the back of the pilot's compartment. He had forgotten to get into the acceleration seat. The ship roared on, the dynamos heating, the red needles quivering along the whole row of dials. Then somewhere in the ship a main breaker blew, the acceleration stopped. But the *Starquest* was shooting away from Nio, heading for Saturn, just grazing the glowing carpet of little discs that made up the big ring—each ring of glowing dust marking a meteorite, and each one of them potential destruction if the ship's flight-path entered the ring. A mile lower and the *Starquest* would crash right into the rings. Wolf lay unconscious. The great ship skimmed along but milli-seconds of flight distance above the swarming ring rocks.

Back on Nio, Hunk Palio stood with one eye glued to the ocular of his scope, watching the flight of the recaptured *Starquest*. Softly he cursed, watching his plans crumble, his chances for domination speeding away. He ordered out his own fleet of raiders.

"Get that ship or don't come

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back." It wouldn't be healthy for the guys responsible for the loss . . .

Gingerly Palio's ships approached the deadly circle of speeding rocks. Twenty miles above the other ship they jetted along. Then they curved off into courses paralleling the circling rocks of the ring—and Palio knew why. Their atomic jets, powerful as they were, would never bring them back from the vast planet if they followed the *Starquest* — now speeding ever more rapidly down to the glowing belted surface of the still unknown planet. For no ship had ever returned from an attempt to view the surface below the hiding clouds.

* * *

OLD Carl Vierling watched the insane flight of the *Starquest,* too, in the wall screen projected from the scope in the hideaway. His big gnarled fists clenched. He sprang from the swivel chair beside the scope, pulled down a switch that started the generators of the little transmitter and began to bellow into the phone.

"Pull her out, man! What in Hell ails you? Pull'er out, Ben!"

Inside the nose chamber of the big ship, Ben heard the voice of the scientist, coming from the visiphone just beneath the instrument board in front of the pilot's seat.

He staggered to his feet at the whiplash of the bellowing old voice, the voice of his most loved friend, the man he admired above all others. The sense of peril in the ship, otherwise quiet as a tomb, was electrifying. The vortex was a silent drive, even when it was functioning, and now the automatic breakers had kicked off and the ship was in free fall. Dead ahead glowed the vast billows of the cloud belts of Saturn, blotting out the rest of space.

Ben did not need more than the sight of the planet ahead to bring him back to full consciousness. Peril struck along his nerves like an electric flash, over and over, and he collapsed into the pilot's seat, pulled back the breaker release, watched the dials jerk, steady, start to register. He was in no mental shape to calculate a tangential course, he only knew with a dead sickening certainty that the radial velocity was far beyond anything this drive had ever been designed to overcome in the short miles remaining. His strength of will alone drove his mind to calculate that his only hope was to set his nose at right angles to his fall and give her every ounce of energy in the dynamos. If the force of his fall could thus be converted into tangential velocity, if he could miss that vast whirling belt of glowing cloud, he would, pendulum-wise, win free by virtue of the very velocity given him by his fall.

His eyes strained, watching the dials for overheating of the dynamos. It would mean death if the breakers blew again. One little fact repeated by the dials gave him a tiny glow of confidence. The nearer he approach-

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ed the great planet, the stronger were the magnetic fields from which his vortex drive drew supplementary energy. Once he had the ship lined up, feeling it out with his nerves rather than his mind, once he felt the sidewise motion drag at the ship as he pulled away from direct fall, he leaned back, relaxed. If he was going to die, there was nothing more he could do. He didn't even look down as the glowing billows spread out, reached, and engulfed the great ship and lashed over the viewpanes with sprays of what he knew were condensing ammonia droplets.

The vapor now obscured all sight from the viewpane. The ship plunged on and on, and the full velocity he could not even estimate. The drive of the ship pulled him against the back of his seat and the immense gravity hugged him to the lower arm of his seat with a rib-cracking force. Gradually this force seemed to increase until the two pulls became agonizing. He blacked out mercifully. The *Starquest* went on fighting for her life.

Quite suddenly his eyes cleared. He caught a glimpse of a vast and tumbled jumble of mountains, of chasms that seemed to plumb down into the very central fires of the planet. Wolf was nearly unconscious, but wonder leaped within him as he saw that Saturn was not a globe. It was a crazy thrown together mass of non-homogeneous rocks, each the size of Earth's moon or more. Saturn must be a planet that had once exploded, whose heavier parts had reassembled, covered their wounds with clouds of gases, and gone on rotating.

Then like a vision the sight was gone, the clouds of gas again obscuring all sight.

ARN, waiting in the outer "office" of Hunk Palio's quarters for an interview, heard an outbreak of cursing, running feet, sharp barked orders. She knew that something had happened, and breathed a silent prayer it wasn't the death of Ben Wolf. Not waiting to go through with her planned deception of Palio, calculated to impress him with her abilities as an entertainer long enough to get some insight into the inner workings of his organization, she got up and left the waiting room, mingled with the excited milling crowd of tourists and others in the chambers of the Dome. She found most of them peering out through the transparent outer wall, trying to see what had occasioned the flight of a dozen or more big armed spaceships from Nio's other side.

Divining that someone, perhaps Ben, had stolen the *Starquest* again, Arn asked the man nearest her. "What happened, is the place attacked?"

Shiv Fraddin turned from his search among the customers for a missing confederate, for he had decided that now if ever was the time to strike at Palio, while most of the force was out chasing the *Starquest*

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and the rest were in turmoil as they searched the place for others who might have been with Wolf and who might still be in the Dome.

Shiv recognized her, which changed things considerably. Here was the dame Palio was looking for to get even with Ben, who had just stolen a march on Palio! Shiv could use her himself, later, as a club over Wolf's head—maybe even get the plans to that new drive in exchange for Arn Vierling. She was a valuable hostage. If things turned against him, he might even use her to bargain with Palio.

"Hello baby, where have I seen you before?" Shiv queried, his voice ingratiating.

"You haven't. But you could tell me what's causing all the excitement?" Arn was instantly sorry she had spoken to this individual, for Shiv had a face not calculated to arouse any sentiment but utter distrust.

"Yeh, I might do that, *if* you were nice to me. But not here, the suckers would hear too much. If you would just come along to the private rooms, I could explain where we wouldn't be overheard."

Arn followed, conquering her inward shudders at the idea of being alone with him. Shiv led her to his own rooms, where he locked the door, turned to her, grinned. "You're going to be here a long long time, baby! I've got plans for you. I happen to know just who you are, so don't try any screaming. Palio won't treat you nearly as nice as Shiv Fraddin. Now just be a good girl, and wait here, and when I've tended to a little urgent business, I'll be back. Bye-bye . . . "

Shiv moved smoothly away from her, into the other room, locked the other door from the outside, and with a chuckle moved on to bring his plans for a turnover in the management of the Dome to a head. Arn Vierling found herself the prisoner of a man she didn't even know, and knew by his actions that he was not shutting her in for Palio's benefit, but for his own. After a heartsick moment, she set about finding a way out of the place, but her efforts were barren.

GRADUALLY the agony of the weight on Ben's right side decreased, he moved his arm, straightened out his spine, shifted an agonizingly cramped leg. He began to breathe, and even as his breath came back into his stifled lungs, the clouds of glowing stuff was gone, the vast circles of the rings spread their ceiling of glowing flowers overhead. He had pulled out of a dive no other ship had ever taken and survived! The *Starquest* had passed a more rigid test for survival than any other would ever dare to give her!

"Ben!" Vierling spoke anxiously into the visiphone. Ben's heart leaped as the old man's voice rasped at him. "Lad, I'm listening with my heart in my neck. Say something, for God's sake!"

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Ben drew his breath deep with agonized lungs. "Tell me where the boys from Nio are. I don't want to say much, Carl!" Ben managed in gasps of labored breath.

"Man, is it a relief to hear from you! I was sure you were unconscious when you took that crazy dive. The gang pulled back from your trail when you entered the clouds. Some circled the rings clockwise, others the opposite, figuring your course would continue in the same plane as the rings."

"Can you see me in the scope, Carl?"

"I don't want to tip off your location in case they're listening, Ben. Don't tell me where to look. Just work your way back when you get a chance."

Ben took his bearings, and was overcome with his good fortune. His wild unguided course had brought him out around the northern pole of Saturn. Nio was on the far side and on the edge of the outer ring. He couldn't have figured on a better escape course if he had planned it. There was no sign of pursuit that he could detect. He decided to try and make it back to the hideout, where he knew he and the old scientist could mount some kind of weapons from the store of experimental apparatus — apparatus from which had emerged the Vierling ray, now the most generally used weapon in all space warfare.

"Coming in Dad. Get the door open—" and Ben pulled the switch which cut off the transmitter.

* * *

PALIO touched the compact high-velocity pellet gun in its underarm holster. He would undoubtedly need it if the showdown with Shiv Fraddin went the way he planned it. Then, with a last lidded glance around him, he jabbed the opening button at the side of the door to Shiv's quarters. When the door refused to open, his resolve to have it out with his lieutenant mounted. He was either hiding inside or hiding something—and Palio pulled out his little master-beam which opened any door in the place. Hunk was not one to let his people keep secrets and locked doors from him. He touched the master beam to the lock, and the bolts shot back as the solenoids, whose existence was known only to Palio, acted in response to the beam.

Arn had been hopelessly pacing the floor. She whirled now, startled by Palio's entrance. Not even her plain plastex coverall—the sort of coverall worn by all space-going individuals because of its comfort and practicality beneath space armor, could dim her loveliness.

In another moment understanding replaced her startlement. For she knew Palio by sight, as he knew her. Palio was far more startled than herself. In a husky, bemused voice, Palio queried:

"You, Arn Vierling, locked in Shiv Fraddin's rooms! What gives here,

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anyway?" Then he sneered slightly, as he knew the one way to make people talk was to make them angry enough.

"So, I have stumbled upon a clandestine love nest, eh? And the immaculate Arn Vierling, of all people! I'm positively ashamed that I ever looked up to you."

Arn put a hand to her face, moved back from Palio in honest bewilderment. She had assumed that Shiv had sent Palio to question her, had no idea of the duel for leadership between Shiv and Palio. The anger at his meaning seeped slowly along her veins, reddened her pale cheeks slightly. Her superb eyes flashed.

"If you ever looked up to anything, it is news, Mr. Palio. Mr. Fraddin locked me in here for purposes known only to himself. I assume you have come to release me?"

Palio grinned, relieved and full of a medley of emotions, fury at Shiv's evident secret plans, aroused lust at sight of this woman of his enemy's —Ben Wolf. One slim hand at her throat, Arn backed away as Palio advanced apishly toward her. Might as well amuse himself while he waited fo Shiv's return. Killing Shiv would be a pleasant job, would somewhat relieve the fury that consumed him at loss of the *Starquest*.

SHIV Fraddin, having rounded up four others of Palio's forces who had long smarted under his heavy hand, returned to his quarters to prove his possession of the Vierling woman and to hold a counsel of war before attempting to remove Palio from their path. Palio having lost the *Starquest*—next best thing was having a hostage for whose return they could bargain for the secrets of Vierling's superior drive. Shiv was full of confidence, sure he had things figured out his way now. He was startled to find his door ajar, flung it open in swift anxiety to make sure that his hostage was there.

The five men stood in a group at the door, each wearing an expression of surprise, amusement, and exultation. For Palio's back was to the door, and his arms were wrapped about a blonde. He was struggling to bear her backward against the wide cushioned divan. He was making heavy weather of it. The blonde was fighting like a tigress, her slim body heaving and twisting with whiplash swiftness, her bright hair cascading down over her face.

Shiv pulled his own pellet gun in one swift motion, slid through the door and to one side like a snake. Here was opportunity heaven-sent. His anger at Palio's violation of his privacy and his rights to his captive gave him every excuse for the murder he had long contemplated. The others, also seeing opportunity in the exhibition, put hands to guns and waited Shiv's lead.

Shiv couldn't fire without danger of striking his hostage. His mind, racing, drove him close to Palio's back, and though he hated to lose the chance to make Palio turn and go for

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his weapon, he swung up his heavy pellet gun and brought the butt down on the gang leader's head.

There was a dull thud of metal striking bone. Palio slumped limply against the blonde Arn and slid to the floor. He lay without moving, his dark face holding an expression of stupid surprise.

Arn dashed the hair out of her face, stared at Fraddin. "Thanks, Mr. Fraddin. I wouldn't have believed it of you." She tried to pull her torn coverall into more decent covering.

"Don't thank me; he had it coming a long time. Just stick with Shiv Fraddin and you'll get out of this alive at least." He turned to the others, fully conscious that if he slipped from here on his hours were limited in number.

"Now we've got to take control before the boys get back and sort out our friends as they unload from the ships. Let's hope Ben Wolf keeps them busy chasing him, and he will. We haven't got a thing that will touch that ship in speed. Legs, you take Jim and get into Hunk's sanctum. He's got an armament in there for just this kind of fracas, and we're going to need it . . .

So marshaling his slim forces, Shiv started his campaign for control of the Dome of Luree, and of Palio's whole setup. Listening, Arn finally divined just where she fitted into the man's plans. Her only value to him was as a hostage for Vierling's life work, the Vierling drive.

SOME twenty minutes later, Janie of the green hair-do heard full details of the turn-over from Shiv himself.

Janie was appointed by Shiv to take care of the files and of the outer office until the struggle had settled down to complete order again. She found herself in Hunk Palio's office, alone, the three guards set by Fraddin in the inner sanctum. From a file cabinet she took a map of Luree and traced out a route to Shiv Fraddin's quarters, via the air-conducting shaft. Then she returned the map to the cabinet, and set forth purposefully on a single-handed mission of rescue. So far as she was concerned, Arn Vierling was not going to be any pawn in the gang's plans for domination of space.

Sprawled at full-length in the dark metal tube, Janie fumbled to release the clip fastenings of the outlet grille. Then she pulled the grille toward her and with difficulty slid it back into the tube. There wasn't enough room for free play of arms and elbows.

The opening was small, but Janie was slim and supple. She squirmed through and lowered herself carefully to the floor of Fraddin's suite. Arn was again pacing, wondering just when this thing was going to show a way to freedom again. The sound of Janie's landing out of the air-duct in the next room startled her. She whirled to the connecting doorway—

"Arn! Are you okay? Jeez, I been

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worried what these gorillas might do with you!"

"Janie!" Arn found herself embracing the little green-haired houri, her heart full of warm gratitude at the advent of a friendly face.

"We haven't time for a lot of gab, Miss Vierling. Shiv is taking over, and there's bound to be gun play before the thing is settled. So far everything's jake. What'd they do with Hunk?"

"I don't know, Jane, and I'm sure I don't care. They hauled him out of here like a side of beef, after bouncing a gun butt off his head; but I assume he is still alive somewhere, worse luck. Have you any plans, or is this just a social visit?"

"You know your boy friend, Ben Wolf, got away with the ship?"

"I assumed as much from the talk. I gather they mean to use me as a hostage to get the ship back again."

It's not a silly idea. Your Dad would give in. At least holding you gives them a lever to use against him. Which is the main reason I plan to get you out of here. Come on, girl friend, be glad you're still slim, and follow me into the air-shaft while there's a chance."

It was two bedraggled and dirty women who finally emerged from the tubes on the outside of the dome, where the over-used air was ejected into the vacuum of space. Janie had made a short excursion to the storage chambers and acquired a pair of fish-globes and oxygen tanks. They made their way to the still undiscovered launch in which Arn and Ben Wolf had come to Nio.

WHEN Ben emerged from the *Starquest* into the comparative safety of the hide-out, Arn was already back. She leaped intuo his arms and hugged him fiercely, he face shining.

"You did it! You big blundering hero, you! If you could have heard the gang . . . "

Ben hugged her hard. He had never been so glad to see anyone. It's funny to be sure you're going to die, and then not to die.

"Did you have any trouble getting away again, Arn?"

Arn released herself from his arms, turned to the somewhat diffident Janie who stood waiting in the background. "This little woman snatched me out of the jaws of you-know-what, and we both owe her a lot."

Ben gave a glad shout. "The girl with the green hair-do!"

Janie gave a bow, and shook hands with Ben laughingly.

"Just call me Jane, Mr. Wolf. I am an old admirer of yours, having heard you cursed by people I hate."

Old Carl stood watching the little encounter impatiently.

"We don't have time for all that, interesting as it may be. They'll be on us in short hours. There are only a dozen places you can hide a ship like the *Starquest* around here, only a few rocks where she could be. They'll locate us by a process of

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elimination, if no one has happened to see us enter here in the past. We've got to mount weapons and be off. The *Starquest* is faster and far stronger than we expected. We're safer in flight than holed up here."

Ben's voice took on a deep note of pride and confidence. "I nearly scraped rock on Saturn's surface, Carl! No other ship has ever gone below the surface of Saturn's cloud sphere and come back to tell of it. I can outfly anything the atomic drives can do, now. But outfighting the weapons the rackets have mounted on their ships is something else. Speed isn't enough. And we've no weapons worthy of the name. We could show them our heels, but sooner or later they'd get a ship close enough to shoot us down."

"I have an idea for a makeshift weapon, never tried before, but we need time. Time to test it, Ben. We can't depend on an experimental weapon when life is the outcome. It's simple lightning, Ben. These rings and clouds of Saturn form the solar system's biggest condenser. They're charged full of electrons crazy to go to work. Biggest lightning works in creation, I'd say. An ion beam, properly manipulated, could throw bolts of power that no hull ever built could withstand."

"An ionizing beam isn't hard. Isn't that what conducts the power in an ordinary Vierling ray?"

"Yes, that's true, but in this case the problem is different. In an ordinary Vierling, the amounts of energy are controlled. In this device, how are you to hold back the immense amounts of natural lightning voltage? Fantastic power there, you know!"

Ben pondered, sat down and drew a little sketch. "It could be handled with two beams, Carl, making the target one leg of a triangle, the short leg of the triangle between the source of lightning and the ship."

"You've got the idea, Ben, but not the exact device. What I have in mind is a grid, on the same principle as the vaccuum tube grid, that lets the electrons through. Free electrons flow from a place where they are many to a place where they are few. An ionizing beam gives them a conductor to flow along. The grid has to be used to keep the flow from back-tracking along the ionizing beam to our own ship. I meant to try this once, years ago, but the rush of work brushed it aside. Suppose we put a big wire grid out on the nose of the ship, and the ion beam firing dead center along the axis of the ship. The grid repels the lightning, being similarly charged, heavily so, as lightning flows from more to less. The firing trigger is like a camera shutter. It lets the grid blink only once, a fraction of a milli-second of opposite charge. In that fraction our ionizing beam flashes to the target, causing a path from the lightning cloud to the target, and the grid closes off the path of the bolt back along the beam—and also pours the opposing charge along

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the ion beam itself. Do you follow?"

Ben Wolf's eyes were flashing swords of battle delight. "It'll work, Vierling, you old wizard, it'll work!"

The old scientist grinned. "I suppose I've added another deadly force to man's self-destructive armament, but this time let's hope it's used in a good cause. We'll mount the ion beam coils of a Vierling rifle behind the grid, and the rings and cloud sphere of Saturn will be our source of ammunition. I doubt that Palio's crew will have anything to outreach that!"

Ben clenched his big fists. His heavy eye brows bristled. His square handsome chin clenched on his bared teeth. "Give me that gun, Carl, as fast as hands will do it. I'll blast Palio out of the ring, sure as my name's Ben Wolf!"

The old man turned, began to pull on a suit of stained overalls. "It will take about an hour—I've got a mess of spare parts around here. Meanwhile, you take a rest, I can do this with the girls' help. You've been through a lot and it might be better if you were fresh if you expect to battle that fleet of killers waiting for you out there."

* * *

"SEEMS like toying with volcanoes and expecting them to play lapdog," commented Arn, as she pushed a heavy chain hoist along the rails to position over the nose of the *Starquest*.

Janie, helping the old man trundle a freight-truck load of gun parts, mainly by getting in his way, asked:

"What's to keep the beam projector from blowing back on the ship . . . " and the old man sighed, as it was too much trouble to try to explain the fundamentals of electrics to her.

"Don't worry, girl, it'll work. Only thing that worries me . . . There are so many of them, can Ben keep away from them long enough to blast them?"

The big swivel and barrel and grid were heavy work for an old man and two girls, but two hours later they were ready.

Arn refused to stay behind, as did Janie, and the four piled into the newly weaponed *Starquest* and stole quietly from their hiding tunnel out into the glowing fluorescing rock-dust of the outer ring. They shot downward toward the glowing envelope of Saturn at an angle that would hide them in its rushing folds just where the ring plane bisected the envelope.

When the old man pushed in the accumulator switch, to charge the grid, they were hovering just under the cloud layer hidden from the sight of possible observers. The vast ring reached up and up a few miles away like a wall of light. The grid began to vibrate, and Ben wondered how the old wizard expected to blink off a charge like that when he was ready to fire the ionizing beam at a target. He knew the whole vast power of all Saturn's accumulated electricity

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was throbbing in that grid, repelling any possible bolt along the beam, and he hoped they wouldn't get any bleed-off rays from the ionizing beam from the Vierling ray-barrel. If this electronic valve device failed to work, it meant finish for them, most probably, as they could not forever elude the determined pursuit of the hijack gangs. They would not rest while a possible eclipse of their power flew around looking for builders.

Arn said: "The whole thing ought to be a radio-controlled torpedo, and we beneath the rock somewhere, to test it out. But go ahead, I'm holding my ears."

Wolf looked at Vierling, who nodded, and he pressed the switch that blinked off the grid and simultaneously discharged the ionizing beam. Sparks flashed all along the nose of the ship beneath the glassite viewport. The rifle mount hummed with recoil, the grid vibrated madly with the sudden surge of power. Far ahead a vast bolt of lightning surged, leaped from cloud billow to cloud billow. The recoil wave tossed the *Starquest* like a chip on the ocean.

Ben gave a deafening shout of exultation, and they all peered anxiously at the still glowing path of the beam, afraid still that the bolt might flash again back upon the ship itself. But the grid was busily charging the path of the beam with opposed charge, and after seconds passed they realized that the device had performed as expected.

"I think we've got a killer-diller, Dad!" murmured Arn, pressing her father's arm admiringly.

"I'm blind," growled Ben, turning his head about, trying to see. "That lightning is brighter than magnesium flares going off in front of your eyes. Fix up some smoked glasses, if I'm going to fight this ship."

Old Carl chortled. "You're not going alone. We're all in this, males and females, and we'll all be needed. So don't try marooning us in the hideout. You can't pilot the ship and fire the gun too. Now start looking for a target; I want to see what it does to a steel hull!"

* * *

SIXTEEN full-armored fighting craft had left Nio to hunt down the "stolen" ship. They were the most powerful fighting ships in space, and only such gangs as Palio's had the over-size weapons, the defensive ray-screens, the equipment to fight in space. Lavishly the gang leaders spent their money on weapons, for only power to destroy kept them alive. Their orders were to hunt down the *Starquest* and recapture it, if they had to chase it to the bottom of Hell.

Hours had passed in the fruitless search since the *Starquest* had dived headlong into the cloud sphere of Saturn's atmosphere. But space is wide, and unless the ship had been destroyed in its dive, they had little chance of locating it quickly. They had nearly given up the search, de-

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ciding the ship must have streaked off for the rim of the solar system. Then Ben had first tested his new weapon, and the vast discharge of lightning shooting out for a thousand miles along the clouds below the rings was a strange phenomena never before observed in such magnitude. They had gathered above that point in the sphere, where the strange "storm" was taking place, more by chance than design. Arn did not notice the pirate fleet from her post at the *Starquest's* forward scope as the *Starquest* nosed above the clouds in their first search for an enemy ship.

They had come up out of the clouds directly under the Palio fleet, and the ray-beam scored past the *Starquest* in a shower of deadly glowing power as Ben swung in a long arc to dive again into the protecting cloud sphere. Again concealed, a barrage of ray bolts crashed about them still as the pirates chanced a lucky hit, firing into the clouds where they had disappeared.

One of the pirates dived for them with drivers full on, hoping to catch them in his infra-red vision beams. Ben poked his nose up again just in time to see his rays lash along the *Starquest's* path. He twisted aside as the enemy curved up and came almost into firing range of the *Starquest's* belly. Ben turned the controls over to Arn and belted himself into the firing seat of the converted Vierling ray installation.

Arn swiveled the ship around on its own track, swapping nose for tail, and Ben triggered the strange new weapon instinctively as the cross hairs bisected the dim, clouded shape of the pursuer.

Lightning flashed in blinding incandescence, seemed to bathe the hull in a spectacular corona of fire. The main bolt barreled through and through the hull and in an instant the dura-steel shell had fragmented, scorched steel hurtled, bodies flew in a dozen directions, and the whole mess of fragments and equipment, weapons and dead men and pneumatic seat cushions, cook-ware, bedding and whatnot, turned over and over like a miniature solar system, revolving furiously as it spun down and down into the obscuring clouds.

"How d'ya like them apples," cried Janie, and spat on the floor to emphasize her attitude of good riddance. But there was no one alive in that ship to resent her words.

"Like a Fourth of July rocket through a box-kite," crowed Arn into her ear, and for an instant the two women embraced like delighted children.

IT was doubtful if the rest of the fleet had seen the short encounter in the obscuring outer layer of clouds. They came on down. They flattened out their dive just above the cloud surface, came head on toward the spot where the *Starquest* waited. Ben played the lightning beam across the sky ahead of them, the vast bolts crashed in a steady

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flare of terrible brilliance. The approaching ships, doing a good eighteen hundred miles an hour, had no way of stopping or even veering off course.

The ships jumped and shuddered visibly as the immense shock waves tore space apart ahead of them. Then they were in range, and Ben touched the ion beam lightly to each nose. The bolts crashed into the protective fields of the ray-screens, lightning flared in great sheets of incandescence. Two more of the big armored fighters nosed down, arrowing into the invisibility of the ammonia clouds, never to come back. Nose plates were blasted off, hulls laid open—then the fleet was gone. Their speed carried them on and out of vision-range, and none of them knew if any more had been damaged or how badly the others had been hurt.

"Wonder if they know what's happened to them?" asked Wolf, grinning fiercely at Arn.

"I doubt it." Her voice was cool and firm. "I don't think it will soak in that quickly. They know something hit them, but just what hit them will take some thinking they haven't the mental capacity to understand."

"I think we ought to keep baiting them along," said Carl Vierling, peering intently out into the murky dimness above the edge of the cloud layer. "If we head out into space we won't have the power for the lightning—we would only be able to run. If they happened to triangulate our course, and get a ship ahead of us—they'd get us. It's safer here."

Unbelieving that any ship existed that could do such damage to the heretofore nearly invulnerable armored spacers, the remaining pirates swung about in a wide circle, looking for the ship they had glimpsed. They were sure the lightning that had struck at them was but an unusual natural display, a happenstance, and not of man's doing.

"We'll really sock them, this time!" growled Ben, as the group of craft completed their turn. He tried the beam in a series of short trigger pulls, and the result looked like a battery of hidden rocket throwers in action, but the flashing bolts of power from the vast cloud layer were more potently destructive than any rocket ever built. Swinging the heavy grid and ion beam on its swivel with a grunt at the weight, Ben got the thing working like a garden hose, splashing the furious energy off first one incandescent ray-screen and then another. The screens resisted momentarily, then flashed out of existence as the network of wires buried in the metal of the hulls became molten flowing metal along with the hull itself. But the interval of passage, slower this time, gave the gunners from Nio time to see the *Starquest* and fire. The heavy bluish Vierling beams crashed about the ship, rocking them back and forth with the violence, and a bolt smashed into the tail of the *Starquest*, leaving a gaping wound where the

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air rushed out with a roar.

Old Vierling swiftly pressed the studs that would shut the rear compartment doors; but the wrecks of the Palio ships had gone on out of range.

They waited, but none returned. Whether all were destroyed they did not know, but if not, the survivors must have reported the casualties to Palio on Nio, and been called in.

They sat there within the outer layer of cloud, trying to decide what to do to make sure they were not caught where they did not have available the vast reservoir of electricity locked within the boiling clouds of Saturn.

"It seems to me that Nio is just close enough to the rings to be in range of this weapon," mused the old scientist, "provided the ring itself also contains the same type of static electric charge. It should, but does it?"

"We'll have to try it out, along the plane of the rings," Ben answered, moving the ship nearer the lower rim of the vast ring. "We can try it now, when we know the gang is in retreat, better than later. Here goes . . . "

The first vast bolt they drew into life from the ring dust itself nearly blinded them, crashing back from ring to clouds. Static crackled across the exterior hull like rifle fire; sparks sprang from their finger tips and their hair stood on end as sparks leaped and crackled everywhere inside the ship.

"Whew," cried Arn, leaning back weakly into the pneumo-cushions. "I don't think you'd better try that again, without a target. Something leaked!"

"From redundancy to defect, the little electrons go . . . . and that means you'd better be sure you've got plenty of chips or the gamble is over."

"It's a gamble we do not wish to take," grumbled old Vierling, scribbling on a scrap of paper. "I've got to install a dual meter on the device that gives a reading from the source and one from the hull, so we know we've got a higher similar charge. The guess work must be removed. . . . Go back to the hideout, and we'll fix up a little safety device or two. That is a lesson we do not want to learn twice. The clouds might have had a higher charge than ourselves, and we would not be discussing the matter."

"It could be metered, at that," agreed Ben.

The *Starquest* darted off, her inductive vortex dynamos drawing power from the very magnetic fields of the planet and of space itself.

* * *

SOME hours later, the big ship lifted from her hiding place on the ring rock, spun silently along around the rim of the glowing carpet of whirling dust, awesome and vast. Following it came the little experimental model, fitted with similar

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weapons, to take a hand. In the smaller ship were Carl Vierling and Janie from Nio, and Ben Wolf and Arn manned the big *Starquest*.

Wolf, watching the big dome in the scope, saw a series of slow-moving shapes landing beyond. He counted four. "The last of the crippled fleet is landing," he commented to Arn. "Wonder how Hunk Palio is taking it?"

"Don't get too close," cautioned the girl. "They can throw a lot of juice from the big stationary dynamos, and they've got the heaviest installation of Dad's ray ever built in the factory. I know—I saw the invoice sheets of Palio's shipments."

"I'll try it from here, then move up a little and try it again."

They were about eight hundred miles from Nio. The whole segment of the ring-rim rose ahead like a rainbow bridge, and Nio loomed slightly off the side of the ring plane like a black lantern from a pole off the bridge. Ben sighted the Vierling, pressed the trigger that gave the dial readings newly installed. The old man had rigged it so that he could not fire except on the second trigger pull. The first lit up the two dials and gave the charges on target and source of power in approximate relation. A third dial also lit, giving the hull-charge of the *Starquest*—and Ben knew he wasn't going to forget to read the dials. Nio gave the lowest reading on the roughly approximate markings of the improvized dials, and Ben triggered off the real lightning.

Slightly behind them and to the left, old Carl moved another ion beam sideward toward Nio, so that the two beams were faintly visible, like the closing pincers of an invisible crab.

Vast sparks flew from the rim of the ring ahead, where the fan of ionization touched the immense natural static generator. Sparks miles in height leaped, pulsing weirdly, crashing out to join the brightly glowing path of the increasingly visible beams, and the dynamos of the grid leads hummed in a rising whine of power. A vast fork-tongue of fire leaped out from the rim's edge, crashed along the path prepared for it, fountained in one instantaneous flare of light on the black round of Nio. There was no sure way to see what they had struck. They might have wasted all that power on bare rock, but they knew they could reach the satellite.

Still Ben drove on, moving slowly closer, not to get into range, but to get better vision of his target. The little spotting scope mounted on the interior assembly of the revised Vierling grew warm under Wolf's tense watching eyes,— then they could make out the big glassite dome of Luree.

"I hate to bust that dome and all the innocent tourists inside," muttered Ben, "But how else to make sure I get that crew of murderers I don't know?" His voice reached over the intercommunication radio

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between the two craft — and Carl answered—

"Go ahead and blast it! Those people would thank you if they knew the truth about Luree."

"I can see the silhouette of the shops. Nio's spin is bringing them up on the far side." Arn was sighting along the scope, worrying too about the necessity of firing upon helpless people.

"I'll knock that shop silhouette right off the rim of Nio . . . "

BOLT after bolt crashed from the ring rim across the little bulge the shops made on the black silhouette of the planetoid. The outline of the shops became a ragged cut-out from which they could visualize the ragged mass of torn girders and timbers, shattered hulls and workmen gasping out their lives in the sudden vaccuum. As they moved slowly closer there was yet no answering fire. It was possible the gunners in the little-used ray emplacements had not even reached their posts.

"Careful, Ben" came the old man's voice from the radiophone. "They're saving a card for us. You get close enough, they'll let go with everything they've got. And they've got plenty."

Even as Vierling's words registered, the distant black disk erupted with flame from a dozen points of fire. The big rays lashed across the rim, lancing along the path already ionized in space by the lightning bolts. The ship leaped over an invisible hurdle, shuddered under their feet as the heavy charges raced across the hull. The glassite of the bridge-chamber blackened over suddenly with the heat.

"Did they hit you, boy?" old Carl was shouting from the phone.

Arn paid no attention to the raging attack, but tugged at the controls of the ionizing beam, centering the cross hairs on the spotting scope and firing again and again. Ben put the ship into reverse drive. Their forward speed checked, and in a few minutes they were moving back out of range again.

"Arn," said Ben, his eyes on the scene on Nio. "If we ever get through this alive, we're going to get married. Okay?"

Arn shot him a glance of quizzical surprise. "What a time to pick for a proposal! Yes, you goon. Now get your mind on Nio and Hunk Palio."

Ben picked a big boulder in the rim flow of rocks and moved the ship in behind it, so that they were out of sight from Luree. Letting the weight of the boulder be their tow-line he allowed the ship to be drawn along, only shoving the nose out from behind the mass long enough to draw a bead with the cross-hairs and let fly a bolt. He watched with sad satisfaction as the dome showed a vast spider web of cracks around a gaping hole. He hated to destroy the place, for it was a beautifully designed stucture.

He knew that the weapons and

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heavier ray installations were in a series of underground chambers. He concentrated on picking off the tiny dots of flaring light which marked a stationery ray-rifle in action.

The rim rock behind which they had dodged moved inexorably closer to the planetoid. One by one the flickering ray-beams of the pirate's emplacements ceased, as lightning bolts crashed across the hundreds of miles still separating them from Nio. This had been a fantastic attack such as no defender had ever conceived undergoing. The very mightiest works of nature seemed pitted against them as the vast bolts zigzagged across empty space and thundered and crackled over the surface of Nio. It seemed as if Nature had run amok, taken the side of the *Starquest*.

Quite suddenly a craft shot out from the pits by the now wrecked shops, spiraled outward madly. Then another and another, five in all, as rapidly as the way was clear.

"All that's left of Hunk Palio's invincible armada!" cried Arn, pointing to the vanishing dots.

"Let's hope the bunch that are left are in a surrendering mood. Let's hope all Hunk's gang chose to run. If some of them are waiting for us to come in, in ambush, we're out of luck."

* * *

BEN Wolfe sat in Hunk Palio's big chair in the private dining room heretofore exclusive to Hunk and his immediate associates. Across from him sat Carl Vierling, and on the other side Arn Vierling. Their eyes were full of triumph, excited anticipation of developments filled their words, and standing behind Wolf's chair where she had so often stood to wait on Hunk Palio, was a green-haired young beauty, Janet Harder. Janet was saying:

"Now that you three have taken over, we'd all like some standing orders, some idea of where we fit in, and what comes next. Then, too, there will be a fleet or two of Hunk's acquaintances here in a short time. They will want to know what gives, and they'll probably figure out there's been a turnover and come in shooting, hoping to take over Luree themselves. You'd better be ready . . ."

Carl Vierling shot her one of his glittering looks, like an old eagle pondering where to sink his beak. Ben looked at Arn but Arn definitely was leaving things up to Ben Wolf.

"Okay, Janie," began Wolf. "Bring in the former employees one by one. We'll take your sayso on which are good Joes, and which are liable to try to sink a knife in us. As each one comes in you say a few words to tell us what to expect. If the person is okay, you say: "Here's a right guy who'll work with us," or for a no good, say: 'Here's Mister Jinks, one of the gang'."

"Do you get it?" asked Arn, "The ones you don't go for, we'll ship off to Titan. The rest we'll take in as a part of our organization. And make

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it fast as you can. We don't want to get caught before we're ready to fight."

The parade of employees—in reality for the most part virtual slaves of the gang—went on for three solid hours. There were over two thousand of them. Labor was cheap. They hadn't cost Palio anything but their board. Most of them had been captured off passenger ships and freighters years ago.

When the session was over, they had five hundred loyal members of the new deal, and a thousand doubtfuls to await passage to Titan City. There were five hundred about whom Janie just didn't know. These would have to be screened later.

Those with space experience Wolf appointed to staff the ships they had captured intact. Those with mechanical training he formed into a crew, with old Vierling at the head, to work over the fleet, and put in the new drives, the new lightning weapons, get things ready for an all-out struggle for mastery of Saturn and satellites, at least.

When he had the work lined up, a day and a half later, Wolf promptly collapsed into bed and stayed there for two days. Then he took over old Vierling's place at the head of the work crew while the old man took time off to rest.

They did not expect attack for weeks, but they wanted to be sure they were ready then. Wolf finished a ten hour shift with the work crew, stopped in the office for a check of the other activities before turning in. Seated in Palio's swivel chair, he looked up absently as Janie came in silently, beside her the squat bulky figure of a man whom he at first did not recognize.

Janie's face was strained. Suddenly she shrilled in a frightened voice. "Shiv must have left him behind. He's been hiding out somewhere. He caught me going over Shiv's things, alone, made me bring him here. I thought you would be out with the work crew in the shops. But no such luck . . . ."

Wolf looked at the snub-nosed little ray in the man's hand, and at the hard, dark eyes of the man who had killed too many times to remember. A man who had carved for himself the top niche in the ladder of power. Wolf managed a grim smile, though his stomach cramped slowly in him and acid rose in his throat. His voice was full of revulsion.

"Pleased to meet you again, Mr. Palio."

HUNK snarled, bared his teeth in nasty grin of satisfaction at catching his enemy apparently with his defenses down.

"You won't be pleased long, Ben. You won't be alive long either. When the boys arrive, Hunk Palio is going to be here to greet them."

Wolf watched the gun in the hairy fist. He glanced at Janie, her face tense under the green tangle of her hair. He knew suddenly what she meant to do. Her eyes on his were

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tragically affectionate. His heart, for some reason, ached with pity for her.

"You've been swell, Mr. Wolf. It's been fine knowing you. I'm sorry to see you die."

"I'm sorry too," murmured Ben, pulling his feet under him, turning to face his murderer. His *would-be* murderer, he hoped. Hunk raised the gun a hair, and Ben breathed a little prayer to his personal God, who somehow had Janie's face . . .

Janie suddenly left her feet in an oddly awkward and high leap, came down with both hands clawing for the gun, her feet wrapping about Palio's heavy legs. Her full weight flung against the squat, strong body made Hunk stagger sideward. Hunk clubbed at her with a balled fist, but she hung on to the gun hand with both hands. Wolf dived forward, got one hand on to the wrist holding the gun, bore down hard as the gun suddenly spouted the deadly blue Vierling beam. Janie screamed, her grasp slipped to the gang leader's waist. He jerked right and left to free his legs.

Wolf smashed his fist to Hunk's ear. The ray flamed again and again about their tangled, threshing legs. The three fell to the floor in a heap together.

Janie screamed again in agony, and then Wolf was on top, one hand hanging to the gun arm, the other hand grappling fingers into the soft neck flesh as he felt for the wind pipe. Hunk's heavy fist, still free, clubbed again and again into his face. Janie slumped weakly and rolled aside.

Hunk lunged to his knees, pulled Wolf to him, and his heavy black haired fist clubbed down on the back of Ben's neck. Pinwheels of fire spun in his mind in a blaze of pain. Wolf brought his head down, butted Palio's purpling face with his forehead, hard. Blood gushed out the heavy nostrils. It worked — their foreheads crashed together. Ben wouldn't try that again. Wolf lunged sideward, fell, brought up a knee that caught Palio in the paunch.

The struggling gun hand relaxed slightly. Ben shook it savagely and the gun bounced across the deep pile carpet noiselessly. The gang leader butted Wolf in the face, and Ben pulled him close in a bear hug. He couldn't quite handle this guy, he was too strong and too knowing. He wasn't going to make it . . .

Blue flame blazed out suddenly in front of his eyes. The weight on him was suddenly heavy, and then the stocky body rolled aside. Hunk Palio jerked in agony, tried to rise, fell back and lay quiet.

When Wolf got his breath and senses back, old Carl Vierling was prying his fingers from the purple throat. Ben let go the heavy boned wrist, too, looked curiously at the white and purple marks of his death grip on the throat.

He sat up, and was suddenly very sick at heart to see Janie lying still beside them, her face smashed and bloody, her legs criss-crossed with

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ray-burns. She was obviously dead.

Strangely, in her dead hand was the gun he had shaken from Palio's grasp. In Palio's side the smoking hole explained how the struggle had ended. Janie had killed him even as she died.

Old Carl straightened out the pitiful slim body, wiped the blood from her broken face. His eyes on Ben's were full of human understanding. His voice broke with pity as he spoke, more to an unseen audience than to Ben.

"Let's make sure this woman's sacrifice means the end of power such as Hunk yielded!"

"That's a promise," whispered Ben. "And we can do it now."

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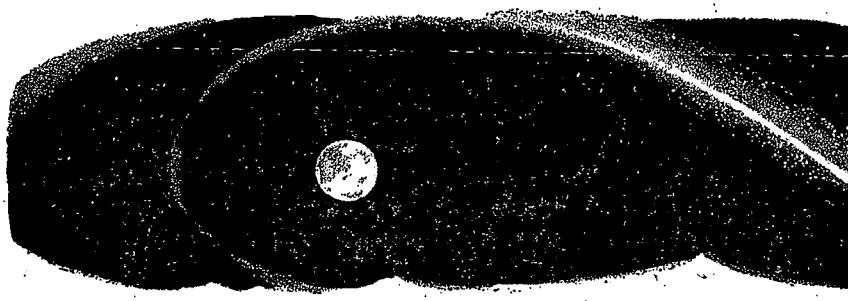

I FLEW IN A FLYING SAUCER

By Captain A. V. G. *

(As Told To Ray Palmer)

**AUTHOR'S NOTE*: *Part of this story is fictitious; which makes it advisable to withhold my name, since I have no desire to become involved in a situation which quite frankly might become serious. Also, my position, which shall remain unidentified, might be interpreted as giving this story the "sanction of authority," which decidedly it does not. All persons named in this account are fictional, but each has his or her living counterpart. Many of the events are actual occurrences, but locations and other designations have been changed to prevent possibly embarrassing deductions of identity. The only exceptions to this policy of camouflage are in the occasional references to newspaper and magazine accounts, where actual names are used which, due to widespread publicity, can be considered in the public domain. Because Mr. Palmer has the world's most complete and authentic research file on the flying saucers, and has the understanding of the situation to relate it in a reasonably authentic manner and to avoid the inconsistencies and inaccuracies that would develop if a writer less acquainted with the facts presented the story, I have given him permission to use my information as he sees fit. My only interest is that the strange adventure I have experienced be told to the world for what it is worth—because the flying saucers DO exist. I know, for I flew in one!—A.V.G.*

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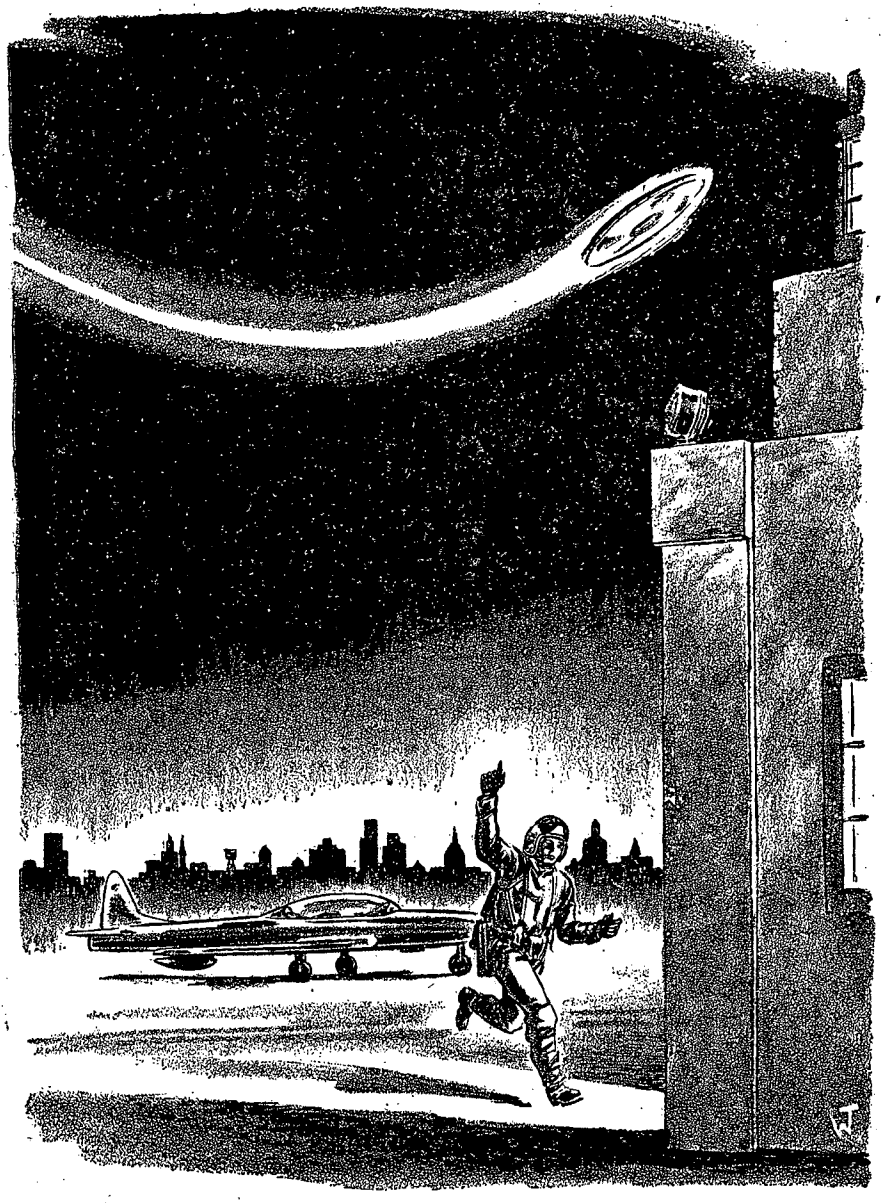
—Illustrated by Bill Terry



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If the flying saucer can be called "scientific fact" — and it is the opinion of high officials that it is — then this story is based on solid science, but its projection is pure fantasy.

MAYBE it was because the moon was so bright that I didn't notice the flare at once. I had just landed my plane and was walking across the field toward the control tower when I heard one of the mechanics yelling to the man in the tower.

"Emergency flare! Twelve o'clock! Somebody's in trouble!"

By the time I turned to look, the mechanic's warning was unnecessary; anyone would have been aware of the brilliance. The whole field was revealed as plain as day, or plainer. It was a weird bluish light, not like that given off by the usual landing flare. Even before I looked up, the color of it bothered me. It was like nothing I'd ever seen before.

But when I stood still to observe the light for a few seconds, a feeling of unease began to chase itself up and down my spine. I stared for a moment longer, then ran for the tower. I wanted to be in on whatever might be going on between that plane and the tower radio. Very high up were a few of those fleecy wisps that set altitude records for clouds—*and they were being lit from the topside.* Whatever plane had dropped that flare was higher than forty thousand feet!

I entered the tower hard on the heels of the mechanic, who was screaming questions. "Barney, what in hell *is* that, up there?"

I had been asking myself the same thing every slap of my pounding feet. And on Barney's surprised face I saw an answer of a negative sort; it *wasn't* a landing flare.

"I don't know . . . " said Barney slowly. He was fiddling with his radio and frowning more by the second. He had good reason to frown, because the most nerve-wracking noise was coming out of it. It was a shrill, keening squeal that clung to one note like a tuning fork. No up and down the scale heterodyning; just a blast that sounded like a buzz-saw hitting a nail.

The buildings of the city were visible from the control tower, and I looked at them now with a feeling of awe growing in me. That light, at least forty-thousand feet up, was making them stand out like raw-edged blued steel on the horizon.

"There goes the moon!" yelled the mechanic. His voice sounded like a high school girl's on stage for her first debate. He was *scared.*

"The moon, hell," said Barney. "*That's* still up there."

"Then there are two of 'em,"

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squeaked the mechanic, who I remembered usually had a beet-juice complexion, only now it was more like milk.

Zipping down out of the zenith was a glaring phosphorescent disk that seemed almost precisely the size of the moon; only the moon was still up where it had been when I grounded my jet. The second "moon" shot over the city, veered a couple of times, changing direction at an angle that made me blink with amazement. I guessed it was traveling at least eight-hundred miles per hour.

Then, before I could make any careful observations to check on distance, size, speed, angle of flight, elevation and so on, it suddenly changed from a disk to an oval, became a thin straight line—as though it was almost two-dimensional, a little thicker in the middle than on the edge—and shot straight up at a bewildering velocity. It vanished from sight, miles up. At the same moment the blue light went out.

THE radio wasn't screaming any more. Instead a voice was coming out of it: " . . . calling control tower. Calling Barney! For God's sake, answer! Clear the field—I'm coming in for a dead-stick landing; my carburetor's conked out."

Barney barked into the mike. "Come in, Archie. Everything's clear." The landing lights were still on from my own landing, and the runways were white in the moonlight. Barney called the crash wagon.

"Say," came Archie's voice from the radio, "did you see what I saw up here?"

"We saw it," answered Barney briefly.

"What was it?"

"Hallucinations. Such things don't exist."

"Quit talking like the boys in the Pentagon," said Archie, an annoyed note in his voice. "I know a hallucination when I see one, and this ain't one."

"Ain't one?"

"Sure. There's a little silvery disk on my tail right now. Flipping around like a pieplate with the d.t.'s."

Barney jumped, grabbed his binoculars. "Where are you, Archie?"

"Northeast, about 30° . . . "

I looked too, and saw something bright flashing. It was a few seconds more before I saw the plane, just ahead and below the flashing object. "What is it, Barney?" I asked.

"Looks like a disk, about three feet across." His voice was puzzled. "It's visible one instant, then invisible the next; like half the time it isn't there."

"It's there *all* the time," corrected Archie from the radio. "It's just flipping around with the jitters, and when it's on edge, you can hardly see it, even from here— Hey, there it goes now, straight up . . . " There was a thud from the radio and a curse. "Damn!"

"What's the matter?" asked Barney in alarm.

"Bumped my noggin, trying to see where it went."

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Barney yelled in sudden consternation. "Watch where you're going! Or you'll bump more than your noggin—you're losing altitude too fast!"

The plane dove steeply, then leveled out just ten feet off the ground. The plane set down with a gear-breaking jolt, bounced crazily, then hugged the ground in a cloud of dust and slid to a halt. A tall figure climbed out of the plane, walked away a few feet, then turned to regard the wreck with hands on hips.

"He's okay," I said.

Barney breathed in relief. "Forgot my business there for a minute."

"Who wouldn't!" croaked the mechanic.

I agreed with him.

THEY got me out of bed at five o'clock in the morning. When I arrived at headquarters, there were two Air Force Intelligence officers waiting for me.

Major Raidenfurst introduced them: "Captain Riley and Lieutenant Wellington, from Wright Field. They're on Project Saucer . . . " They shook my hand warmly.

"Glad to meet you," I said. "I've always wanted to chin with somebody who knew what this was all about."

"It's about nothing real," said Captain Riley. "We've already determined that. This is just a routine investigation. We're checking on that meteoric phenomena seen here last night."

I lifted my eyebrows. "Meteoric phenomena? It didn't look to me like any meteor. Say, did you boys fly all the way from Wright Field just to . . . ?"

"We make a routine check on all events which require an explanation," said Lieutenant Wellington. "Dull job. Project Saucer is just a word . . . "

"Like Manhattan?" I suggested. "You should have been here last night and it wouldn't have been such a dull job. First time I've seen a flying saucer. Always thought the boys who reported them were a little on the Buck Rogers side."

Riley shrugged. "They are, mostly. Sometimes they see actual objects which turn out to be weather baloons or the planet Venus. Venus gets chased all over the sky. However, tell us exactly what you saw last night."

"Well . . . I didn't see it at first; I'd just landed my jet F-82 and was walking in toward the tower, not looking up . . . "

"No, Captain. What happened before that?"

I stared at him blankly. "Before that?"

"Yes."

"Nothing."

Riley looked exactly like a man who is aware he is being patient. "I mean *before* you landed your plane."

"Still nothing," I said. "That is, nothing that has anything to do

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with flying saucers."

He smiled. "Of course not. The flying saucers don't exist. The human eye is easy to fool. An illusion can begin with a reflection in a windshield, a flashing light, or just spots before the eyes—then it becomes a fanciful creation of the mind that follows the trend of the publicity now given the hallucinations popularly termed flying saucers. Why, we even had one air officer claim he'd seen a flying baked apple."

"I see," I said stiffly. In my mind I was beginning to remember comments I'd heard at briefing about how anyone who claimed he'd seen a flying saucer was treated like a child who needed a new pair of glasses, if not a psychiatrist. I'd been guilty of the same sort of thinking, but now I realized the shoe was on the other foot. "About the events before I landed my plane . . . "

"Go on," said Riley, settling back in his chair and stifling a yawn.

"I MADE a circle of the field, came in on orders, and landed in the accepted manner. Nothing unusual occurred. A perfectly routine flight, without untoward incident."

"Did you notice any unusual fluctuation of your compass, or any faltering of your engines?"

I frowned. "No. Compass worked perfectly, and the engines were as pretty as a baby."

"Air sick?" Wellington put in the words in a tone that was pure suggestion. Somehow I resented them more than any others that had been said so far. I could sense him building up the supposition that I was ill, and what I'd seen later was due to an upset stomach or something like it.

"No!" I snapped. "Never been air sick in my life."

Wellington smiled smoothingly. "Always a first time, Captain. We've discovered very often that these observations are frequently preceeded by slight attacks of vertigo. Therefore, the question is merely routine; a matter of being thorough about details that may seem unimportant to you."

I didn't say anything.

"I understand," Riley resumed his questioning, "that after you landed, you and a mechanic and the tower man observed a distress flare over the airport . . . "

"It seemed to be one, the first second or two," I said. "But then it got much brighter than is possible for a flare; and it wasn't the right color. Also, it was over forty-thousand feet up."

"Actually you couldn't be sure of that," said Riley quickly. "The illusion lasted only a very short while, and there was hardly time to check accurately on altitude. Distances are very deceiving in the air . . . "

"I'm a trained observer," I said. "Distance is my specialty. I rarely miss on an estimate—and this time I had several positive factors to work on."

"Positive factors?" Both men

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looked skeptical.

"Yes. Clouds for one; they were the highest type cirrus clouds; and the flare, if that's what it was, lit them from the topside."

Riley grunted. "Cirrus clouds are very tenuous. When illuminated, it would be virtually impossible to determine whether the illumination was from the top-side or not."

I clamped my lips tightly together and said nothing. But by now I was getting mad clear through.

Wellington must have noticed it for he laughed. "We must appear skeptical of necessity, Captain. If we didn't, we'd be taken in by every crackpot in the country. We've already investigated over two hundred of these reports, and each time either found nothing, or were able to explain the matter satisfactorily. We mean no offense."

I shrugged my shoulders, then grinned. "Naturally," I said. "I'm just not wholly awake yet. Didn't expect to be routed out of bed this early."

Riley yawned. "We're tired too. Flying around on these wild goose chases is getting us down. Well, Captain . . . " he rose to his feet and stretched, " . . . thanks much for answering our questions. We're sorry to bother you about something that most likely was only a bit of eye-strain and group hysteria. The flare, plus the publicity about flying saucers, plus physical factors such as fatigue, infected all observers. However, for the record, make out a detailed report of what you thought you saw last night and send it to me, care of Wright Field."

Both men shook hands and departed.

When they had gone, I looked at Major Raidenfurst. "What was all that about?" I asked. "They couldn't have acted more disinterested. Beats me what they even came down here for; they didn't ask enough questions to find out anything."

The Major looked at me peculiarly. "Don't kid yourself, Captain. They've gone over this thing with a fine-tooth comb. Your plane is being dismantled and the engines shipped to Washington, and so is Lieutenant Archibald's. Especially Archibald's; they even went over it inch by inch with a Geiger counter."

"A Geiger counter? That doesn't look like they think it's an illusion!"

Major Raidenfurst looked uncomfortable. "Better forget it, Captain. Might be better to say nothing further about the matter. Even to the rest of the men."

"Sounds like a good idea," I said drily. "Think I'll go out and have a cup of coffee to wake me up."

I FOUND Lieutenant Archibald in the restaurant, sitting by himself at the counter, a puzzled look on his face.

"Good morning, Archie," I said. "Tough luck, washing out your landing gear last night."

"Yeah," he said. "Almost washed myself out with it. But it isn't often

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I get chased by a flying saucer."

I ordered a cup of coffee and sat down beside him to wait for it. I said nothing. He looked at me quizzically.

"How much did *you* see?" he asked bluntly.

I shrugged. "According to the Intelligence boys, nothing."

"Hogwash!" said Archie. "They gave me the same routine."

I nodded. "I guess that's right; it is a routine. It seems that's how they handle all cases of this kind. Maybe they're right at that . . . "

"May be right about how to handle it," said Archie sourly, "but nobody's going to tell *me* I'm suffering from illusions. Why in hell don't they ground me, then? Anybody in this man's air force who sees things doesn't fly anything but a kite."

"The major suggested it would be a good idea to forget the whole thing and not talk about it," I said.

"I'm *going* to talk about it!" Archie burst out. "This thing's got me, and I'm going to find out everything I can about it. That thing was positively uncanny. That's what the Intelligence procedure was for—to get you to believe, by sheer suggestion, that maybe you *were* seeing things after all. They even suggested that I released a flare while excited about my carburetor freezing, and that I did it subconsciously and don't remember it now! It's *that* anny most of all. Doggone ester Archibald releases a *nows* it!"

"No use being pugnacious about it. Maybe it's a military secret . . . "

"Nuts! Have you followed the history of these things?"

"I admitted I hadn't.

"Then let me tell you a few things about flying saucers that rule out the idea that they are a military secret. First, they've been seen for hundreds of years. Best sources of these reports is a book by a guy named Charles Fort, a newspaper man who made a hobby of collecting news stories of unexplainable things, and grouping them together. He never drew any conclusions, but when you see his data all under one cover, it's like a sock in the jaw. That's one good reason it's not a new American plane. It's also a good reason why they aren't Russian, or any other country on this Earth."

"You mean you think they're from another planet?"

"I don't know what to think. That's what I want to know; and I'm going to try to find out. If they are from another planet, it would be the biggest thing that ever happened to this old Earth."

"And maybe the most dangerous," I added. "I can't help thinking what that thing we saw last night could do to us if it had an armament comparable to its flight performance—and its size. That thing was *big*."

ARCHIE wheeled around on his stool and faced me seriously. "How many G's can you take before

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you black out?"

I shrugged. "As many as anybody I've ever met. I guess I'd never come out of ten G's in time to level off . . . "

"How many G's do you think the saucer-boys in that disk last night were taking when they zipped around over the city—and especially when they made that right-angle turn and went straight up into the wild blue yonder—and I do mean yonder?"

My coffee came, and I poured sugar into it slowly. I shoved the cream aside—that last question required straight black java. "Archie," I said, "there aren't any 'boys' like that."

"Now you're tootin'," he said, turning back to his coffee and downing it with one gulp. He waited for me to bring up the obvious. I didn't, so he did it, finally. "Then *what* are they?"

"Do they have to have anybody in them?"

Achie snorted. "That thing was either *piloted* or *guided*. It wasn't slamming around haphazardly."

"Guided sounds most logical to me," I said.

Once more he waited for me to bring up the obvious. Once more I didn't.

"You *aren't* going to do much talking, are you?" he asked, drily.

"Look," I said. "What'll it get you? You know what the scuttlebutt is; try telling something like this around mess, and watch the lifted eyebrows. Maybe you don't know how easy it is to wind up answering Section 8 questions."

He toyed with his empty cup. "You're right," he admitted. "But you and I know different. So, you don't mind if I talk to you, do you?"

"Of course not. As a matter of fact, I'd appreciate keeping up to date with you on this. And along those lines, there's one thing I'd like to have you explain—just what happened to your carburetor up there last night?"

"Nothing much—it just stopped. First thing I knew my motor wasn't getting any gas. The prop stopped just as though somebody had grabbed it and stopped it. Peace, be still—and by golly it was. It startled hell out of me. But before I could wonder about it, that darned flying illusion near blinded me when it went right across my nose. I swear it was going eight hundred miles per hour. I had plenty of altitude, about eleven thousand feet. I can't say how far away fom me the thing was, so its apparent diameter gives me no clue to its size . . . . "

"I can give you a rough estimate," I said. "Judging from where I finally spotted your plane, the big disk was about a mile from you."

"Hmm . . . " Archie looked thoughtful, then his eyes took on an incredulous look. *"Two hundred and fifty feet . . . "*

I made a rapid mental calculation. If Archie's estimation was right as to its diameter, its thickness w somewhere between thirty and

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feet, at the thickest point.

"What kind of metal can take those stresses?" I said. "One of our B-36s making a turn like that at eight hundred per would tear like tissue paper."

"To say nothing of the crew!" Archie finished.

ARCHIE and I bought cameras. Archie got a fancy one with telescopic lenses and bought all kinds of film, including infra-red.

"What's that for?" I asked.

"I've got a hunch about these flying saucers," he said. "I talked to a fellow the other day who was aloft when a fleet of disks went by about a mile away. He said there were five of them, flying along in single file like geese, and moving with a weaving, dipping motion with a sort of flip once in awhile, during which they'd disappear, or nearly so, as they presented their thin edges. He managed to get about thirty feet of 8mm color film on 'em, and about six shots with a black and white film in another camera. When he had the films developed, the black and white shots showed absolutely nothing, while the color film showed some tiny dots which might have been anything, even geese."

"So what?"

"So why didn't the black and white film have the same dots, or the same geese, if that's what they were?"

"At a mile it's hard to say what you'll pick up with a small camera like that."

"Sure. So that's why I'm getting a telephoto lense, and why I'm getting infra-red film. It might just be that infra-red will pick up what ordinary film would miss. Might be the red in the color film that registered what this fellow got."

"I think you're just wasting your money," I said. "In the first place, the chances against you seeing another flying saucer are extremely remote."

"I don't think so. I'm going to be up there every minute I can, and I'm going to be looking for them. I've estimated that considering the number of reports that can be considered at least partially reliable, and considering that during this time of the year the sky is cloudy seventy percent of the time, and considering that people rarely look up, there must be hundreds if not thousands of these things chasing around all the time."

I snorted. "Now you're talking like a dope. Don't let your imagination run away with you."

"I'll get pictures," he said doggedly, "and when I do, I'll make these Intelligence officers eat crow."

I hefted my own camera thoughtfully. It was only an ordinary snapshot camera, and I'd have to get up pretty close to anything in the sky to get any definition, but I thought about the disk we'd seen last night and I nodded to myself. That would have registered on this film as a white streak, proving its existence at least, if not its shape and physical

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detail.

"I'd like to get a picture myself," I growled. "Then let anybody 'suggest' that it was an illusion!"

TWO weeks went by, and all that time the newspapers continued to print stories about flying saucers. It wasn't long before the whole country was laughing. I'd begun to get tired of continually scanning the skies while aloft, and although I kept my camera handy every time, I never got a chance to use it.

Then one day I came in for a landing and saw Archie running from his own plane, which he'd just set down. Even from the air I could see he was excited. He was waving an object in his hand I recognized as his camera.

I came in as fast as I could, and by the time I found Archie, he was talking excitedly to Major Raidenfurst. When I came in, he wheeled toward me. "I got it!" he said excitedly. "I got it."

"Got what?"

"Picture of a flying saucer!"

Major Raidenfurst seemed trying to say something, and I looked at him. Archie subsided and looked too. "Let's get it developed, Major," he said.

The Major had Archie's camera in his hand. He was frowning.

"What's the trouble?" asked Archie.

"We'll have to turn this over to Intelligence for development."

"Turn it over to Intelligence?"

"Yes. I've had orders for two weeks to turn over anything that pertains to flying saucers, especially any pictures. It's important, they say, that in the event of an exposed film, they do the developing to make sure there is no possibility of fraud in the process of developing."

"Fraud?" said Archie stupidly.

I spoke up. "You mean they really think there is something to all this, and it's important enough to take all those precautions."

"Apparently."

"Only one thing," said Archie, sticking his chin out a little, a peculiar stubborn look in his eyes. "Do we get to see the photos after they are developed?"

Major Raidenfurst shrugged. "I don't see why not."

Archie looked doubtful. "Okay," he said uncertainly, "but let's get them in fast. I *know* I've got something here!"

"Spill it," I said. "What happened?"

"You won't believe it without the pictures," he said. "If I didn't know that I've got a beautiful close-up shot of the thing, I'd keep my fool mouth shut. It's almost too much even for me to believe, and it *happened* to me!"

Major Raidenfurst turned to his desk. "Mind if we put your story on tape?" he asked. "I can send it along with the film. Might save everbody a lot of time."

"Good idea," said Archie. "And I'd like to have a copy of the darn

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thing. Just to check, later on."

Major Raidenfurst lifted his eyebrows and grinned. "Good idea, Arrchie. On a story like this, you'd better not change it!" He warmed up the machine and turned the mike toward Archie. "Go ahead, let's have it."

ARCHIE cleared his throat and looked slightly mike conscious. "Well, it was about 1030 hours. The sun was in a clear sky, and it was hazy along the horizon. But no clouds. My motor was purring as smoothly as a contented kitten after lapping up a dish of warm milk. Like always, I was watching the sky to see what I could see—and there was nothing, I swear. Yet, all at once there was a bright flash, much like a photographer's flashbulb. It came from above me, and very high. It must have been plenty bright to compete with that sun. I'd say it was above the nose of my plane—I was heading east—at about eight degrees, or was object at 11 o'clock?

"At first I thought it must be a reflection from a high-flying plane, but I didn't see any plane. I reasoned it might be lost in the sun, and so I began to think maybe it *was* just such a reflection.

"But then my motor began to cough and sputter. I pulled on the carburetor heat and gave it full throttle to blast any ice from the carburetor that might have accumulated. The engine wheezed a bit, then quit. Just like it did that night when we saw the disk.

"Right then I began looking for whatever had made that flash, because I knew now that this thing was an identical occurence as far as my motor was concerned. But I didn't have time to do much looking around; this was going to be another emergency landing and I had to scout out a place to set her down. After a few seconds of looking at the ground I realized a funny thing—I wasn't nosing down; I wasn't even losing altitude! Instead of dropping in a normal glide, my ship was right on the horizon with its nose; and it remained fixed there like it was glued, in normal, level-flight attitude!

"You can believe this or not, but my plane was standing perfectly still in the air! It was just as though gravity didn't exist. I didn't even have any forward motion."

"Archie," said Major Raidenfurst, stopping the tape recorder, "you sure you want all this recorded?"

"Yes sir!" said Archie stiffly. "I've got pictures to prove it. It's what happened, and if Intelligence really wants to get to the bottom of this thing, every detail will be important right now, while it's fresh in my mind."

The major nodded. "Go ahead. But brother, this had better be a good picture or you're going to spend a lot of time with Air Force psychologists." He switched on the tape recorder.

Archie went on. "There was an odd electric-like prickling sensation

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coursing through my body. It was as if the plane were full of static electric charges that were jumping to my body from all sides. It was then that I saw it . . .

"Just above and beyond my left wing-tip was a flying saucer. It was motionless in the air, about a quarter of a mile away. It had a flanged rim that projected from the main body of the saucer, and this was dotted with round portholes. The thing was a dull, silvery color.

"Beyond it, and slightly higher, this one about two miles away, was another disk, exactly like it. It was motionless too, and it struck me as standing guard. I got a funny idea that I was being observed like a fish in a bowl, and my skin began crawling. I don't mind telling you that right there I began to get scared. This went on for what I'd judge to be two full minutes.

"I couldn't see anything through those portholes, and after a while I decided they weren't portholes at all, at least not windows that would show the interior. They seemed more like jet openings, and they seemed to glow as though there were neon lights inside. There was also a projection on the top, in the center, that glowed the same way.

"My prop was standing still in front of me, not revolving at all, and it gave me the eeriest feeling. I looked down at the ground. In the silence it seemed to me that I was dead. Only the sound of the wind whistling past broke that sensation.

"I had snapped off the magneto switch when the engine quit, and now I got panicky and switched it back on in the desperate hope that it would work. It did. The starter coughed and the propeller began to spin. I looked once more at the flying saucers—and then suddenly I remembered my cameras. That brought me out of my funk. The thought of what a fool I was being, with this opportunity, made me snatch up my camera like it was hot. I only had to snap it, turn the film, and snap it again. I had both saucers squarely in the field of the range finder. I know I got them.

"But then those darn things began to look ghostly. You might say they seemed to turn slightly transparent. All at once they were gone . . . "

"Gone?" I said.

Archie looked at me with his chin stuck out. "That's exactly what I said. They just disappeared. They didn't fly away, just vanished."

"Faded out?"

"I don't know. At first it seemed to me they were turning transparent, but then they were just gone. There wasn't any real transition period. The transparent appearance might have been optical illusion or retinal memory when they blinked out of existence. I don't know!"

Major Raidenfurst said, "What happened then?"

"My motor roared into life as if a wet blanket had been taken off it. I turned back toward the airport and

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came home as fast as I could."

Major Raidenfurst snapped off the tape recorder and sat down behind his desk. "You know, Archie, that's the most incredible story I've ever heard, and I wouldn't repeat it myself to anybody for the world, but damned if I don't believe you. And if those pictures turn out . . . "

"They'll turn out," said Archie confidently.

But they didn't.

IT was three weeks before the films came back. Meanwhile Archie was fit to be tied. Repeatedly he moaned to me, "Why in hell did I ever turn those films over to those guys!"

"What else could you do?" I asked. "If you didn't, they'd come and get them, and you'd be in trouble."

"I don't mean it that way," he said. "What I should have done is come in, kept my mouth shut, had the films developed, then spilled my guts. That way I wouldn't have lost the films and my only chance to prove my story."

The day the films came back I walked into Major Raidenfurst's office to find Archie sitting in a chair staring flabbergasted at the strip of film."

" . . . according to Intelligence, the films were over-exposed," Major Raidenfurst was saying. "The photographer's report suggested that you had your shutter on time exposure, and ruined both shots. Anyway, there's nothing on the film."

Archie looked up at me. "That's the nuttiest thing ever heard of," he said. "Supposing that dumb bunny's suggestion is true; then two other of the films, the first two on the roll, would be over-exposed too—because I didn't change the lens opening at all after I took them."

"Are you sure it's your film?" I asked.

Archie handed the film to me. "Positive. See those first two exposures. They're two shots I took just for the purpose of identification, and for comparison."

The exposures showed two girls, posed beside airplanes. One was apparently less exposed than the other. I pointed it out. "Lovely girls, apparently, but you say you didn't change the exposure on them?"

"No. One's taken in clear weather, the other in rain. That's infra-red film."

The Major cleared his throat. "About the girls," he said. "Intelligence reports that they are obviously nice dishes, but that they'd hardly call them saucers."

Archie just glared and the Major subsided.

"Sort of plays hob with your theory about infra-red being better for saucers, Archie," I said.

"I notice you don't accept the theory that those two black films are bumbling photography," he said.

I shrugged. "Anything could happen. You might have turned the lens to time exposure accidently when you snatched it up."

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"The camera's right here," said Major Raidenfurst. "We haven't unpacked it. Might be interesting to see how it's set now."

Archie snatched up the package and unwrapped it hurriedly. Then he held it up triumphantly. "It's still set exactly as I had it set," he said.

"They might have changed it at the lab," said the Major.

"Why would they? If they thought of changing it at all, they wouldn't, if it *was* at time exposure and they wanted to prove their point."

"You've got something there," I said. "But that doesn't change the fact—that film is over-exposed."

"And consequently you can't prove a word of your story," said Major Raidenfurst.

Archie jumped. "Hey! They didn't return that tape!"

Major Raidenfurst frowned. "No, they didn't."

Archie looked at him. "Well, when are you going to ground me?"

"Ground you?"

"Yes. You can't let a man fly government property who has illusions like I have!"

The Major looked serious. "Nobody's asked me to ground you," he said. "If they did, I'd ignore them; I'm in command here. Besides, I don't believe you were seeing things. Until proven otherwise, I'm going to consider that every word of your report is literal truth. And Archie, why don't you try ordinary color film . . . ?"

THE next day Archie disappeared, and within a week his disappearance had launched one of the greatest secret manhunts in the history of the Air Force.

Major Raidenfurst called me into his office that first day.

"Archie's gone," he said. "The last we heard from him was a fragmentary radio message that was cut off in mid-sentence."

"Flying saucer?" I asked quickly, profoundly shocked by the alarming news.

"No. What he said was *space ship*. He was very excited."

"Space ship!"

"Yes. The complete message was: "Barney! I've sighted something big! By God, Barney, if this isn't Buck Rogers' space ship itself, I'm going batty! I'm going after it. Got to get a picture of *this!*" Then a moment later he came on again, yelling his head off. *"Barney—they're going to ram . . . "* And that was all.

I felt all washed out inside. "Ram . . ." I repeated faintly. "Not Archie! Major, when did that happen?"

"Two hours ago. I've already ordered search planes into the air, but I just got word from Washington to send out everything we've got. Also, a half-dozen other fields are going to join in the search for Archie's ship. We've got a pretty accurate fix on his position at the time of the message, and we're going to cover that area like a blanket. This is the second time something like this has happened today!"

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"*Second* time!" I said incredulously. "Who else?"

"Not one of our men. This was a National Guard flyer. He went up to chase a mystery object with two other flyers, and climbed for half an hour. Two of the planes gave up the chase when they reported the mystery object was no closer than before. But the third pilot went on, to his ceiling without oxygen as he reported. The theory is that he blacked out and crashed, but according to his radio reports the object he was chasing was huge and metallic, and moving against the wind. It might have done something to cause his crash because he was aware that he was approaching his oxygen ceiling and expressed regret that he would soon have to abandon his chase. He was a good man with plenty of experience, including battle experience. He wouldn't commit suicide.

"The opinion of Air Force officials is that he was chasing Venus, but I talked to the colonel in command at the field, and he said it *wasn't* Venus. I hardly knew what to make of it until this—this happened to Archie. Captain, there's something big going on, and we're right in the middle of it. We've got to find out what it is. Washington wants to find Archie at all costs, and quick."

"Where do we look?" I said. "I'm ready to go right now."

He told me the area where the big search was beginning and in ten minutes I was in the air . . .

IT was a week before we found his plane. It had crashed, apparently from a great height. The motor was two miles away from the spot we found the left wing. Those two pieces were all we ever found of the plane. It was as though it had disintegrated so completely that the other fragments were lost beyond possibility of finding them. The motor had buried itself twenty feet in the ground.

I was there when they checked the parts for radioactivity, and there wasn't any. The reasons behind these strange checkups baffled me, but no amount of questioning about it could get any information.

There was no sign of Archie's body.

I expressed my thoughts on the matter privately to Major Raidenfurst. "I don't think he crashed with that plane."

"That's a fantastic thing to say," said the Major cautiously. "Just how do you reason?"

"He might have had time to bail out, in which case he might have landed a great distance away from where the wreckage actually came down. He might be lying in the mountains somewhere, for all we know, injured or dead. He might have been knocked on the head and suffered amnesia. Anway, I want permission to keep on looking. That's wild country up there. If he's alive, I want to give him every chance."

"I'm afraid you're indulging in wishful thinking," said the Major

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gravely, but he waved a hand. "You can look until your term in the service is up, if you want to," he said simply. "I want to find Archie as much as you do. Not knowing what happened is something that bothers hell out of me; finding his body would be a relief by comparison."

THERE'S an old saying that when you go looking for trouble, you generally find it. I say it's not true. So far, flying saucers had meant trouble every time they turned up, at least as far as I was concerned; but now that I was looking for them I couldn't find even a reflection in my windshield—not one little spot in front of my eyes, not even an illusion. I guess that's the best answer to those smart alecks who keep laughing at observers of flying saucers, and suggesting glasses or physical checkups: I couldn't even suggest anything to my vision when I tried.

I saw absolutely nothing for two months, until the day I gave up in disgust. Then it happened.

I was up on a night training flight, and I was commanding a flight of rookies in practice landings and formation flying at night. We were also giving the ground radar installations a workout.

It was Barney who alerted me. "Something up there, . . Don't know what it is, and can't *see* anything, but the radar shows six pips and there are only five of you up there. We're checking on private planes . . "

I could hear the gabble in my radio as Barney checked on all the local airports, and I became more and more interested as all of them checked no planes in the air. Except one. That one reported a local doctor, whom I knew well, in the air about eight miles away.

"Not him," said Barney to me. "That pip's still there, and it's *flying formation with you!* Trailing on the end of the flight. Why don't you have a look-see? But be careful, he's not using lights."

I ordered the students to maintain position and fly straight, then I whipped around behind them and came up slow, just behind the end of the flight. There was nothing to see.

"You're getting close," said Barney, his voice suddenly anxious. "Don't crash him!"

"How do you crash nothing?" I asked. "Barney, are you sure there's a pip here?"

"It ain't no cloud!"

I turned off all my dash lights, even though they were the latest type black-light, and peered carefully at the empty air before me where Barney said the strange plane was flying formation. There was no moon, but the stars were bright; there was absolutely nothing flying at the end of my formation.

I closed up and took place as the end plane and called Barney. "Where is it now?"

"A. G.," came Barney's unbelieving voice, "I'll never believe a radar reading again, because you and an unidentified aircraft are at this mo-

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ment occupying one and the same space!"

I flew on silently for a few minutes then ordered the flight to circle back to the field and continue to circle it. They did; but I didn't. I became aware of a strange prickling sensation on my skin, and all at once a charge of static electricity jumped from the fuselage to my body. It stung, but wasn't particularly painful. I felt as though my body had gone to sleep. My hands were numb; I couldn't move them on the controls.

"Where are you going?" came Barney's voice. He sounded surprised. "You'll be too far away for good observation in a couple of minutes."

I didn't answer. I couldn't. My tongue seemed thick in my mouth, and I felt an all-gone feeling in my stomach that was nothing else but sheer alarm.

OUT beyond my right wing-tip a light was appearing. It was a round, disk-like light, without any detail, and its leading edge seemed to be roiling and indistinct, as though it were made of whipped cream in constant rolling motion. It glowed whitish, like a neon light, and gave no impression of solidity at all.

I stared at it, apparently hypnotized. I had the horrible feeling that I was being observed, studied by the thing. It struck me all at once as a giant eyeball, flattened out, and without any pupil. The comparison almost made me want to laugh, except for the scared feeling in my middle.

Then reason took the upper hand and I began to study the thing. Whatever it was, it was there. And it wasn't anything supernatural, of that I was sure. Therefore, it was something natural, either meteorological, or artificial. It couldn't be a meteor; it could be electrical, perhaps something in the nature of St. Elmo's fire. But it had flown intelligently, in formation, if it was the *same* thing that had made the pip on the radar screen. St. Elmo's fire could hardly exhibit intelligence. Further, St. Elmo's fire couldn't cause the paralysis that was now gripping me.

Then there was the possibility that it was mechanical. A guided, mechanical television eye, perhaps even a photographing device that could be guided remotely, which would pick up whatever it "saw" and relay it back to wherever its guidance was coming from. If that somewhere was a foreign power, here was a method of espionage that was frightening in its implications. An enemy could pry into every secret of our aircraft and gather information in perfect safety. They could watch our craft in flight, observe performance and structural detail.

Very true, but don't be afraid . . .

My mind blanked. I simply sat there petrified. Had those words been *my* thoughts? They had just popped into being without conscious volition—but then, stray thoughts

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seem to come from nowhere into everybody's mind frequently. The mind is a peculiar thing. Subconsciously, I might be trying to lull myself away from the fear that was gripping me. The words might come out in my mind just as they had. Rationalization, from the subconscious— But was it?

There was no answer.

Had I been expecting one?

Unbelievably, I realized that I had. At that instant, the light moved. It zipped upward at fantastic speed, performing intricate maneuvers. I realized at once that my paralysis was gone, and with sudden impulse I took out after the object. It stayed tantalizingly before me and even though I pulled my plane up to its peak speed—something like 450 miles per hour—it remained just ahead. Then it speeded up, came around in a great circle, and headed straight for me! I remained headed for it, nose on. At the last instant, I lost my nerve. I veered off.

When I could bring it back into view, it was hovering above me, rocking gently to and fro, motionless in the air. I came up at it fast. Suddenly it took off—from a standing start—at top speed. If anything living had been in the queer thing, it would have been subjected to at least forty or fifty gravities; its acceleration was tremendous. If mechanical, here was a paradox—where would such tremendous energy come from? What sort of motive power did it have?

I was beginning to sweat now. If this was a spying device, what sort of power guided it? What sort of radio guidance method could be so perfect, so instantaneous, so accurate at the distance from which it must operate.

Was I wrong about the mechanical concept? Was this thing something else—something *alive?* Were there things up in Earth's upper air, beyond the stratosphere, as mysterious as might exist at the bottom of Earth's oceans, miles down?

Once more the thing veered around, came directly at me. This time I held grimly to my course until I realized that now we must crash—the thing was headed directly toward my propeller. At the last fraction of a second, it veered. It flashed aside and behind me. I felt a sudden exultation—I had made it give way. *It* had funked out first!

I came around as tightly as I could, my senses fogging, but when I could see it again, it was hanging indecisively in the air a quarter of a mile away. Then, as though making up its "mind," it hurtled upward on its thin edge, straight into the void. I watched it go out of sight like a narrow streak of light.

I sat stunned. After a moment I became aware that my radio was clamoring at me.

"For God's sake, A. G., what are you doing up there? You're shadow-boxing with yourself!"

"Barney," I said, wonder in my voice, "do you mean to say that

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there weren't any other pips on your screen the last few minutes?"

There was an instant of cautious silence. "Why? Should there be?"

"There damn well should!" I said. "Where's my training flight gone to? I'm coming down as soon as I get those babes out of the air!"

I questioned every one of those trainees closely. All of them were sure of only one thing: there had been no plane or flying disk or other object near any of them until I'd gone off by myself after ordering them back to circle the field. And then, they told me, they had seen a small whitish object near my plane, glowing like a neon light. So it wasn't hallucination. It had *really* been there.

That night I made up my mind. I called Wright Field and asked for the head of Project Saucer.

"I just talked to a flying saucer," I said.

There was a moment of silence at the other end of the wire. " . . . Talked to one?"

"Does that make any sense to you?" I asked in return.

Another momentary silence. " . . . It might. But perhaps if you'd make yourself clearer . . . "

"You mean *prove* it talked to me?"

"In words?"

I thought about that for a moment. He wouldn't have said that if he hadn't known that it wasn't an audible kind of talk!

"Would you believe me if I said so?"

"Frankly," came the voice, with no hesitation this time, "no."

I grinned. I'd found out one of the things I wanted to know. "Then I can talk freely. If you want to, you can send out a psychiatrist when I'm finished; or you can just disbelieve the whole thing and forget it."

"Go ahead."

"Well, I saw a light—no definite shape, except it was disk-like and saucer-shaped. That is, it was like two saucers put together, or like a discus. It traveled at speeds up to eight hundred miles per hour. It made tight turns that would have smashed anybody inside, and also smashed any material such as our own planes are made of. It was about thirty inches in diameter by about eight inches thick at the thickest part. Its leading edge, or whichever edge it presented in the direction of its motion, seemed to become indistinct, looking somewhat like frosting in a melted condition. I was hypnotized by the light, I believe, and was, or fancied myself to be, paralyzed and unable to talk for a short time. I wondered about the nature of the disk, and whether it was spying on our aircraft, being some sort of eye device that relayed pictures back to whatever was directing it. As I wondered this, the words *very true, but don't be afraid* repeated themselves in my mind, not audibly. I chased it around, and twice tried to crash it. Once I got scared off, the next time it was the

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one to refuse contact. Then it turned on edge and went straight up out of sight at a speed I couldn't even estimate."

"That all?" came the voice, after I was silent a moment.

"That's all," I said calmly.

Again the momentary silence, then: "Okay, make out a report and send it in. However, I believe your suggestion that you were hypnotized—perhaps by your dash lights—is correct. Flying saucers are illusions such as you have experienced, and your testimony is quite valid proof of that fact. Very good reporting, Captain . . . "

"Thank you," I said. "I thought you'd see it that way. However, one last point . . . ".

"Yes?"

"I had my dash lights out."

I hung up.

ONE thing was clear to me now—the investigators of Project Saucer knew a lot more about flying saucers than they were telling: flying saucers were real; they did fantastic things almost beyond belief; these fantastic things were credible all the same to those who knew the facts; standard policy was to attempt to make the idea that the saucers were illusions seem reasonable to all who reported observations; written reports were important.

All these factors being true, I could draw the conclusion that they weren't one of our own secret developments—or else how account for the paradox of destroying the impression of illusion they were trying so hard to create, by being so interested in detailed reports?

I considered the only other reasonable alternative: that it was a Russian invention. A moment later I snorted aloud. Obviously it wasn't. Whatever had talked in my mind was more likely to be actual illusion (and I was sure it wasn't) than Russian-inspired! Logic dictated that these things were much too far advanced for our own science, and certainly so for the Russians.

But imagining the possible truth behind these strange things was merely indulging in fantasy. I dropped my useless thinking and got to my feet. It was more flying that would gain results. I'd contacted a saucer once; it could be done again. Besides, hadn't it said not to be afraid?

I laughed a bit, without humor. I thought: Are you kidding?

There is something terrifying in the unknown. I remembered when I was a kid, and my mother died. After I heard the news I was put to bed. Along toward morning every noise in the house magnified itself until I was in a state of terror. Every creak was the footstep of something invisible. Every light or shadow was the shape of a phantom. I wound up huddled under the blankets praying that my dead mother's ghost would not appear. Reason said my mother, who loved me, was not fearsome,

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either in the flesh or as a ghost. Yet, the thought of seeing her in phantom form had terrified me. This saucer thing was like that, only more so. I wanted to see more flying saucers, but when I thought of that voice in my mind, chills went through me. In a way, I had to find out, to beat the unreasonable fear that would well up in me all my life if the mystery wasn't solved. I had to face a reality, rather than an illusion. It was a personal matter now . . .

RILEY and Wellington arrived the next morning. I wasn't very surprised; what they had to say did surprise me, however.

"How'd you like to join Project Saucer?"

"Join it?" I lifted my eyebrows. "What for—to chase butterflies?"

Wellington shrugged. "You might even find yourself in the position of chasing butterflies," he said. "We had an idea you'd like to have a try at something like this. Besides, two of our best boys were killed the other day, doing much the same thing . . ."

I grunted. "Meaning you're telling me this isn't exactly a picnic you're asking me to go on?"

"Something like that. It's like a game of Russian roulette—you never know when the butterfly is going to bite."

"This is flattering," I said.

" . . . Offering you this job?"

"No. Admitting flying saucers are real!"

Riley looked at me for a long minute. "What was real about the one you saw?" he asked suddenly. "For instance, in your considered opinion, which of the ninety-eight elements might have been used in its construction?"

I looked at him blankly. "For instance," I said, "how about magnesium?"

"Do you ordinarily fly your aluminum object in the same space filled by a magnesium object, without apparent conflict?" he asked quickly.

"No. But judging from some of the things radar sees that aren't there, its observation in this case does nothing to prove what you are trying to infer," I said.

"You're kind of a skeptic, aren't you?"

"Not exactly."

"Good," he said, clapping me on the shoulder. "That way you won't believe too much, and you won't disbelieve too much. Because if you do either, you'll go nuts in Project Saucer."

Wellington pulled a picture out of his pocket and handed it to me. I took it from him and looked at it. "What's this?" I asked.

"A flying saucer."

"Who says so?"

He shugged. "I do."

"Then you must have taken the picture. That's the only way you could be sure—because this picture could be faked by anybody. Could be, for instance, a picture of a heel-print in the sand, photographed out

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of focus. It could be a shadow cast on the negative while developing."

He took the picture from my hand. "I took it," he grunted. "You're right about that. Also you're right about it not proving anything. But someday I'm going to get a picture that is in focus, and with enough detail to show us *what* these things might be, if not *where* they come from and *who* they are."

"You fellows don't know a great deal about them, do you?" I asked.

"You know more than we," he said.

"You're the second man who's talked to them, at least."

"Where's the other?" I asked eagerly.

"Dead."

"You're sure trying to sell me this job," I said grimly. But according to the laws of chance, that puts the odds in my favor. I'm your man."

I took off for Wright Field in the morning. Major Raidenfurst asked me to keep him informed. "I'm convinced these things are real, and I want to know everything you can tell me."

I promised.

In the air I wondered if that had been wise; I might be told a lot of things that I wouldn't be permitted to tell. But then I thought back to what Wellington and Riley had admitted, that they knew less than I did. Obviously then, there was nothing to tell, unless I found it out myself; or it was discovered by others in the future. Unless I got definite orders not to inform anyone, I intended to keep the Major informed. It was more a personal matter with him—Archie had been his friend too.

Two hours after I took off, I knew I would never reach Wright Field. I knew it when the big golden globe appeared, high in the heavens above me. At first it was just a bright dot, like a star, but it kept getting bigger, and obviously it was coming directly toward me. I got out my camera and began clicking pictures steadily. I was getting tremendously excited, and at first I was unaware of the menace to myself. All I knew was that I was finally getting good pictures, and that the thing was coming closer all the time, and that if it kept on, I'd get one at extremely close range.

Its size was impressive, but all at once a thin wisp of cloud drifted between me and the object and I stopped taking pictures so great was the shock. Instantly my eyes became adjusted to the truth: instead of the thing being only a few thousand feet away, I knew it was still miles up, maybe even five or ten miles.

"My God," I said aloud, "how *big* is that thing!"

I did some hurried mental calculations, and as the facts seeped into my mind I remembered a story I'd heard about an Army Captain in Alaska, flying in a B-25, who had reported a huge golden globe that had rushed across the nose of his plane. "A half-mile in diameter—"

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he had said. Everybody had laughed. He'd been grounded.

"Half a mile!" I whispered. "He was underestimating. This thing's at least a mile in diameter!"

A mile in diameter. This was no *ship*. This was no man-made object. It *couldn't* be. It was a giant meteorite, rushing in from space, directly toward my position on Earth, probably still thousands of miles out. Soon it would enter the atmosphere, flame like the sun, smash into the planet . . .

I was witnessing the advent of a horrible catastrophe. I thought of Meteor Crater in Arizona, where ages ago a giant meteor hundreds of feet in diameter had smashed into the desert—or as some scientists had suspected, smashed into a populous, civilized area, wiping it out.

Here it was again, but this time on a much vaster scale. When this golden thing struck, it might turn the planet into a convulsed mass of incandescence. Or it might not be as large as it seemed, but would certainly wipe out all life on the North American continent, and possibly cause a world-wide toll through ensuing earthquakes and eruptions and by clouds of poison gases. I was numbed by the thoughts thronging through my brain.

All at once my perceptions did another double-take. Once again the apparent size of the object changed. This time it happened when the object passed through the cloud. Abruptly it scaled down again; but it was still a mile in diameter. Now I knew it was already in our atmosphere, and was not proceeding at a speed of interstellar magnitude, such as many miles per second, but only at a mere thousand miles per hour, and slowing rapidly. Once more it became obvious that it *was* artificial —although the words man-made simply would not register in my mind. No race of *men* could have made this thing.

It was close now, and I began taking more pictures. It was a brilliant orange-gold color, and suddenly it struck me that it was *hot*. Incandescently hot. But not from friction from its airspeed, certainly. The thing seemed to radiate heat of its own. I could feel no heat, but the impression was tremendous and terrifying.

Although it was going slowly now, I became painfully aware of the fact that I had waited too long, that I couldn't get out of the way. This thing was going to crash into me—if it didn't burn me to a crisp before contact.

I dropped the camera and nosed my plane down into a steep slant, putting on all the power. If there was any way to get clear, I intended to do it.

But right then came that strange numbing paralysis, that sense of static energies coursing through the plane and my body, and in my *mind* a voice: *Don't be afraid. You will not be harmed. We are friends.*

(To be concluded next issue)

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Something — a shiny metal cylinder — was hanging out there. "The Whisperer!" I shrieked in terror . . .

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The END of SCIENCE-FICTION

By Robert Bloch

Ormsbee got up at the science fiction convention to warn of approaching horror — but the horror itself spoke in a strange way!

I know I shouldn't be telling you this, because we are all pledged to secrecy. I guess the publishers were afraid of what might happen if the news leaked out.

"Let it ride," said one of the editors at the meeting where the decision was made. "Of course there'll be talk about it at first. But we can fix it with the trade papers and the public press. The only trouble is that the fans will do a lot of complaining and investigating. They will wonder why science-fiction magazines aren't going to be published any more."

"Well, let them wonder. We'll just keep quiet. We must. And after a while the readers will forget. They'll find something else to think about. Of course the whole thing is awkward, but we have no choice — not after what happened."

That's the way it was finally decided. And up to now, nobody has breathed a word. Nothing has leaked out concerning the reasons for discontinuing all science-fiction publications — forever.

I'm breaking the pledge of silence now for the first time.

I'm going to tell you what happened on that last day — the day when science-fiction ended forever.

Naturally, I have my reasons for speaking out. I'll give them to you cold.

First of all, I owe it to Richard Ormsbee to tell the truth. I know he'd want it that way, and as his friend I must do it.

Secondly, I think you should be warned. Yes, I said "warned". Because already I've heard rumors that some fan groups are agitating for the return of science-fiction magazines. Several publishers who never put out a fantasy book are thinking of entering the field. This must not happen.

There's a third reason, too. A most important reason.

This nation, this world, is in a bad enough situation without the addition of further madness and confusion. We are in no shape or condition to beat back new enemies — particularly the enemies I have in mind.

Does that sound peculiar to you? A little whacky, perhaps? I wish it were just that. But there's a grim truth behind my words.

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Even now, these same words may be read by others. Others who read not for pleasure but for information. Others who might plagiarize, just as they plagiarized on that final, fatal day when science-fiction died.

When you finish this, you'll understand what I mean. And I want you to understand, for a reason.

I want you to go up into your attic or down into your cellar, wherever you've stacked or saved back issues of science-fiction and fantasy magazines. Go and find them, and destroy them. Destroy them instantly and utterly. Destroy them before they fall into the wrong hands and destroy you.

Remember, now — it's a bargain.

In return, I'm telling you the whole story. Here is the way it happened — the way that science-fiction died . . .

THE Tenth World Science Fiction Convention was scheduled for Labor Day Weekend. As a fantasy reader, you probably know all about the Conventions — organized on an annual basis by fans in various cities, they have become an institution. Each year, several hundred fans, editors and authors meet for three days in the selected city, attending regular sessions of speeches, lectures and discussions at a convention hall. This last year was New York's turn to play host, and Labor Day Weekend had been eagerly awaited by fandom.

I pulled into Penn Station on Friday afternoon and lugged my grips down the platform. I kept my weather eyed peeled for a glimpse of Richard Ormsbee. He'd promised to meet me at the train, but there wasn't hide, hair nor mustache of Dick as I made my way through the crowd.

Instead, a short, pudgy-faced young man jostled toward me and stared upward. He hesitated for a long moment, then spoke.

"Pardon me, but are you Robert Bloch?"

"What did you expect?" I asked. "A gorilla?"

"No — it's just that you don't look the way I expected you to look — I mean —"

"I understand," I shrugged. "It's true that I used to have two heads, but one of them was amputated last year. I carry it in my suitcase. Want to see it?"

How far I might have succeeded in driving him crazy I'll never know. Larry Fisher came along at that moment and grabbed my arm. He's my agent, and he handled my arm gingerly so as not to injure the muscles I use in typing stories.

"Good to see you, Bob!" he greeted me. "By the way, meet George Selby. He's a fan of yours." Larry gestured toward the moon-faced young man. I started to apologize for my rudeness and attempt to put him at his ease, but Larry took charge of the situation.

"Let's get your things over to the hotel," he suggested. "Then

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we'll grab something to eat." He waved Selby aside. "See you at the Convention tomorrow," he promised. "You'll have plenty of time to talk to Bloch then."

He hustled me over to the cab-stand and we ploughed through traffic toward the hotel.

"Where's Ormsbee?" I inquired, as we shot up Broadway with the speed of a rheumatic snail on crutches.

"Haven't seen him for the last few days," Larry told me. "Of course he's pretty busy — guest of honor at the Convention and all that. He's probably typing the final draft of his speech right now."

"He promised to meet me," I said.

"We'll call him from the hotel," Larry suggested. "I know he's anxious to see you."

I was anxious enough to see him. Richard Ormsbee and I had been friends for a dozen years. When I'd met him through correspondence he'd been a fan. Then he'd turned writer, and within a few years his reputation was established not only in the field of fantasy but beyond. He sold to the slicks, turned out books, did radio and TV work, and at the same time managed to retain his warm and unassuming friendliness. Where I come from in the writing business, that's no mean achievement, and I liked Dick for it. As a matter of fact, it was the news of his selection as guest of honor that drew me to this Convention.

So here I was. But no Ormsbee!

There was no answer when we phoned his house from my hotel room. That puzzled me. We'd made plans to meet by mail. What was wrong?

I didn't have much time to puzzle over the problem. Otto Binder and some of the New York gang arrived about five, and then Ackerman called — just in from the Coast — and Bob Tucker came up looking for a deck of cards.

We had dinner somewhere eventually, and drinks. We kept running into other Conventioneers, and more drinks. Gradually I forgot about Ormsbee.

BY the time I got back to the hotel, there was no room for anything in my head except the trip-hammer that seemed to be operating up there.

Then I went into my suite and found — Richard Ormsbee.

He was sitting on the bed. Or rather, he *had* been sitting there. But when I opened the door he jumped up.

"Oh — it's you!"

"Expecting a blonde?" I asked.

"No. Not exactly." He smiled, but as we shook hands I noticed that he seemed tired. What had become of the usual Ormsbee banter that had charmed so many people across (and under) the table in days gone by?

I thought I had an obvious clue. Dick must be suffering from a bad case of stage-fright. The idea of

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making a speech tomorrow had him stymied.

"Convention got you down?" I asked. "Thinking about your speech?"

He shook his head. "It's not my speech, Bob," he said. "I've got that part figured out. Would you like to hear it?"

"Sure, Dick. Of course I would. Shoot."

Ormsbee hunched forward on the bed and began to talk. He never cracked a smile, but what he said was oddly grotesque.

"Mr. Chairman, friends, and science-fiction fans of the world:

"What I have to say to you today is not very pleasant. You will not particularly enjoy listening to it, and I certainly do not enjoy telling it to you.

"But I have no choice, so I'll try to make it short and to the point. Friends, my message to you is simply this —

"Science-fiction must be destroyed!

"What do I mean by that? I mean that all writers must stop writing science-fiction stories. Stop immediately, and forever.

"I mean that all publishers of fantasy magazines must give up publications — immediately, and forever.

"I mean that all fans must abandon their interest in the field. They must destroy all current and back issues of magazines, and amateur publications. They must burn — yes, *burn* — all books and pamphlets pertaining to fantasy.

"I mean that this must be the last World Science Fiction Convention. I mean that the name, the very memory of science-fiction must perish from the earth. I mean —

"What's that?"

The last two words were a shout. Ormsbee jerked his head towards the window, his face white with sudden shock.

I headed for the open window and peered out. I saw nothing beyond except the lights of Manhattan.

"I'm pretty shaky," Ormsbee murmured. "For a minute I thought it might be *them*."

He pulled out a cigarette, stuck it between his lips, but didn't light it. I faced him grimly.

"Listen, Dick, what is all this? What's with this screwball speech of yours? What's all the melodrama about 'them'? Are you kidding?"

He shook his head. "I could give you the rest of the speech," he sighed. "That would explain it. But I'll boil it down. In the speech I give details, because I must be convincing. I want them to believe me. But I'll just give you bare facts."

He sat down once more and lighted the cigarette. "It started on the day they called me up to tell me about making the speech at this Convention.

"Naturally, I was pleased. I decided to knock off work and take a stroll. I went down to a little bookbinder by the name of Breutsch. He had a copy of H. P. Lovecraft's *The Outsider* that he was re-binding for

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me.

"I walked into Breutsch's little basement shop and the old man shuffled out of the back room. When he saw me, his face fell a bit.

" 'Isn't it ready yet?' I asked.

"He shook his head. 'Mr. Ormsbee — I don't know how to explain this to you — but your book has been stolen.'

" 'Stolen?'

" 'Either that, or the rats got it. There's prints like rat's paws in the dust near the window. And the window's broken.'

"He led me into the back room and showed me.

" 'Must have happened last night! he said. 'I had your book in clamps over there on the window-edge, drying. When I opened up shop this morning, here's what I found.'

"I stared at the dusty ledge. There were clamps setting against the wall. They had been pried open. And all around the clamps were prints. Prints in the dust. They looked like the marks of rodent claws, or the lines etched by scraping fingernails. But with one peculiarity. Each disturbance of dust came in a regular pattern of six marks. Not four, like a rat's claws. Not five, like fingerprints. Six. Six indentations in a pattern, repeated a dozen times.

"Above the ledge was the window. The pane had obviously been shattered, but there was no broken glass. The opening was not jagged, but quite neat. A glass-cutter does that kind of a job. Then an arm might have reached down, a hand pried open the clamps, and taken the book.

"Very simple. Except that the marks were *not* made by fingers.

"I stared again at the disturbed dust. And then I began to shudder. Don't ask me why. It wasn't anything like your yarns, Bob. No feeling of 'hovering horror' or 'evil presences'. But the skin crawled against my neck and my mouth went dry and I thought of my lost Lovecraft anthology and shuddered.

"Who — or what — had stolen this book? Why had this particular volume been chosen? It wasn't a regular robbery.

"Breutsch said something about insurance and paying me back and notifying the police. I mumbled something about accidents and petty thieves. But we were both lying. As I left the shop I stared into his eyes and saw that *he* knew.

"Then, when I got home, I found the apartment had been searched."

ORMSBEE doused the cigarette and continued. "There was no dust in the place, and I saw no unnatural prints. Somehow I was glad of that. But evidences of search were unmistakable. They'd pried a window up—don't ask me how, since I'm on the fourth floor with a sheer drop to the courtyard below — and they'd gone through the place thoroughly.

"No money or jewelry was missing. That was strange.

"My clothes had been jumbled

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about a bit in the closet. And there was a gap in my bookshelves. Some back issues of magazines were gone. Also I missed a photograph from the dresser. But that was all.

"I could have called the police, but I didn't. I merely straightened things out and took a drink. But I couldn't straighten out my thoughts.

"And when at last I went to bed and tried to sleep off my forebodings, I had this dream."

Ormsbee's voice was low. It deepened as he went on.

"I dreamed that I had fallen asleep and left the radio going. Now, in my sleep, the radio spoke to me. From the blare of late dance-band music, a voice slithered out. It came from far away — and it called to me in accents that weren't formed in a human throat.

"That's what disturbed me, I guess. Because the words, as I half-heard them, were soothing. *'Sleep'* said the voice. *'Sleep and rest.'* Gentle, beguiling words. The words of a hypnotist. And from a throat that wasn't meant to form words. Even in slumber I could tell that about the voice. It wasn't a foreign accent, it was an *alien* one. *'Sleep and rest,'* it droned.

"I might have obeyed at that. I might have sunk into a deeper coma. But then everything coalesced. Something about the prints in the dust and my disturbed room and the theft of that particular book seemed to add up at the sound of the alien voice. Something clicked into place. I knew, suddenly, what it was that I suspected and feared. And I woke up with a scream.

"*'The Whisperer!'* I shrieked. *'The Whisperer in Darkness!'*

"I awoke. There was a glowing in my room, but it didn't come from a light, or anything inside. It came from the open window just beyond. Something was hanging out there, something suspended before the opening. It appeared — in the brief glimpse I got of it — to be a shiny metal cylinder of surprising dimensions. I had the vague impression of sudden, blurred movement. Then the thing faded, or moved away before the echo of my shout had time to reverberate.

"I was out of bed at a bound. The sky beyond the window was clear. But so was the realization that haunted me now as I guessed the truth.

"Since that time, nothing has happened. Nothing *definite*, that is. I'm taking some sedative the doctor made up, and there are no dreams. It's bad enough to live with my thoughts while I'm awake.

"Not that I'm afraid. *They* must have what they were after, anyway — the Lovecraft book and the magazines. That should give them all the information they need. Of course, I'm bothered by their taking my photograph. It's utterly fantastic. But so is the whole business.

"So, you see, I must make the speech I gave you. I must make that speech tomorrow and warn them

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—warn the other writers and the ditors. Tell them that *they* are ere and plan on taking over. And ve must do our part in preventing t."

Ormsbee's monologue ended, but ny bewilderment had just begun.

"I don't see anything," I con-essed. "Who are *they?* What is his warning you want to make? What's the clue of *The Whisperer in Darkness?*"

"Don't you remember the story?" isked Ormsbee. "Lord knows where Lovecraft got the idea—if it *was* nly an idea, even then. It's about he things that came from beyond; rom Pluto, the dark planet. They had a queer, superior intelligence, and planned to rule Earth through renegade humans who acted as their spies.

"They stole human intelligence, too, when they needed it. And gradually, by means of hypnotism, deception and outright violence, they planned to take control of mankind. When a man suspected the secret or knew too much, he was — eliminated."

"Now wait a minute," I said. "Fun's fun, but you aren't trying to tell me that good old HPL's story is fact and the monsters from Pluto are on your trail."

"Of course not. But something is," Ormsbee said, earnestly.

"Huh!" I snorted. "Sounds like something out of Eric Frank Russell or a hundred other science-fiction yarns I've read. Trouble with you is that you've been reading too much science-fiction!"

"That's the point," said Ormsbee. "Now you're getting it. Only, *I'm* not reading science-fiction. They are!"

"What do you mean?"

"Suppose," said Ormsbee, slowly, "that beings do exist. Beings from another dimension, or another planet. Beings forming part of a life-pattern alien to Earth.

"Suppose, again, that these creatures — whatever their purposes or desires — have suddenly found a way of communicating with Earth. Or even of *coming* to Earth in what we writers have spoken of so glibly for so many years: a space-ship.

"Suppose, for the sake of argument, that this is the truth behind the so-called Flying Saucers, as has often been suggested. Grant that it's true. Outsiders with a superior intelligence arrive on this planet — what will they do?"

"Wreck the Empire State Building," I sneered. "They try it in every story."

"Exactly!" Ormsbee declared. "It's from those stories that they get their information!"

"Now, wait a minute —"

"DON'T you see?" he persisted "Picture these aliens, these outsiders, arriving through a gap in the continuum of space or time. They have no direct kinship with humanity or human thought. The strongest link would naturally be

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through the minds of those who are at least conditioned — however unwittingly — to the possibility of their existence. To be specific, the writers of fantasy and science fiction, whose brains can conceive of such beings.

"That's how they were drawn to me, I suppose. And through my mind they learned of the books and the magazines.

"Suppose you were a spy in enemy territory. Wouldn't you want to secure plans, maps, theories of strategy? Of course! And the theories of strategy for those outside of earth are — science-fiction stories!

"Where else would you find ideas on how to destroy the earth, or rule the human race? Where else would you find such detailed consideration of just how the world might be successfully invaded from outside?

"They took the Lovecraft book containing that *Whisperer* story. And then they came to my place for magazines. There's some psychic connection with my unconscious mind, and it guides them. Of course, I can't guess what they want, or what they plan to do. Why they tried to get to me in sleep. What that half-waking vision of a silver cylinder signifies.

"All that I'm sure of is that a menace does exist. And I'm making my speech tomorrow. I'm telling the science-fiction world everything I've told you. We've aided an enemy unconsciously for years, and it must stop.

"For whoever they are, and whatever they plan, we mustn't help them any longer. We must stop writing the stories. We must seal our imaginations to those images of *outside* that seem to aid them.

"Perhaps they will come out in the open, soon. It may be that we can make plans, anticipate their movements, learn more about them. But come what may — I'm giving my speech."

Ormsbee concluded abruptly, forcing a grin as he rose to his feet.

"Now I must rush," he said. "Maybe you think I'm crazy, and maybe everyone will think I'm crazy, after tomorrow. But please promise me one thing — not a word to anyone until I appear at Convention hall. Good night. See you tomorrow."

I fumbled for words, but there was nothing to say. He left the room, left me standing by the open window.

For a long time I stared down at the lights of the city below. Then I stared upward at the distant stars, and at the gulfs of blackness between the stars.

And I wondered —

LONG before the official opening of the Convention at 10 AM, the penthouse hall was crowded. There must have been over four hundred in attendance. Everyone milled around, and I had a hard time spotting familiar faces. But the whole fantasy field was out in force: editors, authors, and fans.

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Then George Selby, perennial fan, grabbed my elbow and steered me into the hall outside. He began to pump my arm and also me, for information. What did I write? How did I write? Why did I write?

The more he talked, the more I wondered. Meanwhile, the speeches of welcome had already started in the hall and the seats were filled. By the time I managed to shake friend Selby and get back into the hall there was nothing left but standing room against the wall, near the door. And Ormsbee's name was being announced as the next speaker.

There was applause as Richard Ormsbee stepped out from the back of the raised platform and approached the lectern and microphone. Knowing what I did, it was easy to detect signs of strain on his rigid features. He looked pale, and his lips were compressed beneath his mustache. He walked slowly, and kept his hands in his pockets. I could imagine how nervous he must be, but his face was stolid, immobile.

The applause subsided. A building attendant peered into the room, glanced around curiously, and withdrew. I hunched against the wall and prepared to listen.

Ormsbee had already begun to talk. His voice sounded dully over the microphone. Hall acoustics were not all they should be. But then, neither was his speech.

For Ormsbee was not delivering the speech he had recited to me the night before!

I listened intently as I heard the unfamiliar sentences pour out.

"The peculiar irony of it," he was saying, "is that you — who are presumedly authorities on the subject — know nothing about it. Absolutely nothing!

"What do you know about space, for example? Not as much as Columbus knew about the western hemisphere before he sailed. Not as much as the ancient Phoenicians, rather. For early sailors at least ventured out to sea.

"But no man has ever risen more than a few dozen miles into what you call the stratosphere. No man-made instrument has ever risen much higher and returned.

"And yet, in your ignorance, you presume to set forth 'laws' about space. A stupid Einstein, using the formalized gibberish you call mathematics, tries to compress the entire universe into a concept bounded by three-dimensional figures and equations.

"You and your scientific postulates! They are not based on actual observations of physical reactions, but on hollow philosophic attitudes toward those reactions. You *name* rather than explain; yours is a system of labelling.

"Exactly what is the 'cosmic ray'? What is 'corpuscular radiation' and 'auroreal streamers' — what is this jargon about 'E' layers in electronics? Just words, gibberish of little men who don't even dream of what elec-

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tricity really is. Men who claim to chart the universe while squatting on an Earth so faultily weighed and measured that there is no mathematical certitude anywhere. And if a phenomenon presents itself that is not in line with your hollow theories, you ignore it.

"You pitiful, deluded ones, who don't even dream of what goes on under your very noses, who sneer at Fort, scoff at the few thinkers who dared to speculate on the truth —"

Ormsbee's speech wasn't exactly making a hit. Even though he delivered it stolidly enough, there were growing murmurs, grumblings and mutterings rising to open complaints.

"Still, you have unwittingly served your purpose. Ignorantly, you have opened the way to the very abysses of which you complacently scribble in your childish fantasies —"

I felt an arm jab into my back, and turned. The building attendant who had peered into the room was staring at me, now. There was no curiosity in his face, only a grimace of horror.

"Let me through," he whispered. "Got to make an announcement, right away —"

"Wait a minute," I began. He shook his head. Suddenly he opened his mouth and began to yell, in a voice that drowned out Ormsbee's words from the platform.

"It was you fellers done it!" he shouted. "You and your crazy tricks!"

HEADS turned, craned. The attendant faced his audience.

"Get it off the roof right away!" he yelled. "Get it off, or I'll have the whole gang tossed out of the hotel!"

"What's on the roof?" I snapped.

"That damned silver cylinder — it come down from the sky and it's humming and purring —"

Silver cylinder? Hadn't Ormsbee told me?

I took sudden command of the situation.

"Where's the stairs?" I yelled. I'm afraid my own voice held a note of hysteria. "Come on, let's see this thing."

We turned. The speech was forgotten as the crowd poured out at our heels. Half of them must have thought it was a gag—but nobody likes to miss a gag.

The jam on the staircase to the roof was terrific. But I was still right behind the attendant when we reached the top.

I stared at the empty roof.

"It's gone!" His jaw hung slackly.

"No it isn't" I muttered. "There!" And I pointed toward the horizon.

Faint and far away the flicker of light shown down. Something spun off into space — spun like a silver top against the sun. Something that might have been a great round metal cylinder. Something that might have been a flying saucer. Something that might have been a space-ship from a story.

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I don't know how many of the thers saw it. But I saw it. And hen —

"Where's Ormsbee?"

The familiar voice whispered at my ide. It was Larry, my agent. He tared at me as I bent my head. "I alled him this morning to pick him ip on the way to the Convention. But he wasn't home. Then I came over here alone. Just got in and saw the crowd up on the roof —"

"It's all right," I said. "Ormsbee's here. Downstairs making a speech when this interruption came." I steered Larry back downstairs, through the throng of excited fans, al babbling at once.

Ormsbee was not a part of the crowd here or on the corridor below, so I assumed he was still on the platform, patiently waiting for his audience to return.

We entered the hall. It was deserted. Only then, as I stared up at the platform did the monstrous conjecture form in my mind.

They —

They had taken the Lovecraft book. That story—*The Whisperers in Darkness* — would give them an idea. No wonder Ormsbee had feared it. As he said, we writers could tell them what to do.

So they took the book. And they took his magazines. And inspected his clothing. And stole his picture. And when they couldn't get to him in sleep, they waited.

Waited until last night —

Why? Because he was going to make a speech. A speech about destroying science-fiction. A speech warning science-fiction and the world about invaders from outside.

So they had taken steps, moving in their great metal globe, to see that Ormsbee wouldn't make that speech.

But he had just spoken. Or else—

I didn't say anything to Larry. I just thought of the strange mockery of the speech I had heard, and I thought of how curiously immobile Ormsbee's face had been, and how he had held his hands in his pockets, walked woodenly, and talked in a drawling drone.

Then I was running down the aisle, clawing my way up to the lectern. I knew what I was looking for, of course. Anybody who had read Lovecraft's story would guess.

I was looking for a rubber mask — the kind that can be fitted over the head. A rubber mask moulded in the features of Richard Ormsbee.

I didn't find it.

It wasn't until I stumbled backstage that I found something — and promptly passed out.

EVER since that discovery I've been waiting for other things to be found. Waiting for other manifestations of those presences from outside.

I don't know when they will move again. I don't know exactly what they want. If they plagiarized the ideas in Lovecraft's story they can plagiarize any horror, make it real.

All I can do is plead with you, im-

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plore you to abandon science-fiction forever. Don't give them any more help!

All I can do is tell you what I stumbled over when I went backstage.

It was Ormsbee's body. Or certain *parts* of it.

They had sewed up the head again very cleverly, and it wasn't until the doctors arrived and made their examination that the *changes* could be detected.

It took a complete autopsy to determine how the brain had been removed and the spinal column altered. Even now they cannot account for the tangle of wires, coils and metal filaments that filled the empty skull and extended through the body.

Some say it was a mechanical brain, substituted to animate a corpse. There have been learned comments about the use of unclassified metals and alloys.

On only one point are they agreed — whatever the mechanism animating the body of Richard Ormsbee on that fatal day when science-fiction died — *it wasn't made on earth!*

The End

SCIENCE FICTION BOOK REVIEWS

Many writers are known by the themes they ride—like A. E. van Vogt for instance, who dotes on immortality, telepathy, and plots like tangled skeins. Few of his books (if any) omit these ingredients and his latest, *The House That Stood Still* (Greenburg Publishers, New York, $2.50) is no exception. Van Vogt attempted to write a detective story with science-fictionish overtones and almost succeeded.

The protagonist, Allison Stephens, is a wishy-washy sort of a hero who in real life couldn't get to first base with women or problems—and his problem here is discovering the background of a strange woman who has been living for hundreds of years. She and many others like her live in the House that stood still, stood for many thousands of years, sometimes in the open, sometimes buried, while the immortal occupants went about their lives. Our hero discovers the House, discovers them, discovers the secrets of the House that they—despite their age—never knew. And in the end he wins the girl and immortality.

As a detective story it isn't entirely satisfactorly because of several useless plot-twists and some unexplained strings, but as science fiction its well worth reading. The reader will find himself far ahead of the hero in various discoveries.

—*Bob Tucker*

There is probably no greater or more fundamental truth about alleged humor in science fiction than the fact that what is one man's sidemeat is another's corn pone. From

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Dr. Hackansaw, Dr. Fosdick and Tubby down to the present, the corn content of most of it has been high. But corn can be treated in certain ways to deliver quite a kick, and two of the most experienced distillers of the stuff now have books on the market simultaneously.

Whatever you may think about Nelson Bond's standing as a genius he is a born story-teller who mercilessly dishes up the oldest plot lines in new clothing and butchers his metaphors even more mercilessly than I have, to generally satisfactory effect. THE REMARKABLE EXPLOITS OF LANCELOT BIGGS: SPACEMAN (*Doubleday & Co., Inc., New York.* 1950. 224 p. $2.50), to quote the title-page instead of the jacket, hitches together eleven zany episodes from the life of his by now well known hero, a Jimmy Stewart type in space-pants who always drags himself and his long-suffering companions into horrible messes from which he emerges waving a fistful of orchids, or the equivalent.

Here is Lancelot, fresh on his first ship, the venerable lugger *Saturn*, destroying a cargo of vegetables for Venus, stealing a set of battery jars for garbage cans, and converting the crocks into gold. Here is Lancelot, demoted to a cook, coping with the most fiendish pirate of the spaceways. There are also the episodes of the uranium vision-plates and the football game—the vacuole sleigh-ride—and the Biggs velocity-intensifier, which winds up with Biggs as thoroughly deceased as Sherlock Holmes at a similarly early stage of *his* career as a meddler. But Holmes made a comeback and so does Biggs, with antigravity in one freckled fist and a bride in the other, going on to carry seeds to Iapetus, to face down the privateers of Iris and engage in high diplomacy on Themis, and wind it all up with a typical and endearing gesture. Somewhere along in there was the adventure of the gooey asteroid. From any other author it would be deadly. From Nelson Bond it's good.

That "any other author" crack should be hedged a little, because one William Gray Beyer, who may mean nothing to present-day fans but who in 1939 was making pleasant the declining days of Munsey fantasy, also displays his ability to give a shot of vitamins to an old formula in his MINIONS OF THE MOON (*Gnome Press, New York.* 1950. 190 p. $2.50). This is the one about the strong young hero, yclept Mark Nevin, who volunteers as a guinea-pig for a new anesthetic and wakes up 6000 years later with the world gone to pot and himself a blue-blooded superman who can regrow any parts of his anatomy which happen to be chopped off, live indefinitely without eating, and of course take on any number of villains plus a gorgeous gal.

The difference is Omega. Omega is the last of the lunatics—pardon, Lunarians—now touring the provinces as a disembodied intelligence with the convenient power of embodying just about at will. Omega is an essentially immortal practical joker who feels equally at home as a talking skeleton, an over-friendly bear, a drifting voice, a BEM, and assorted other participants and who puckishly louses up Mark's schemes to see what will happen, but usually turns up when he is needed. In view of the fact that Omega has been horsing around for better than fifty thousand years, he probably *was* Puck. With his able assistance Mark competently annihilates two Russian super-brains, makes the girl-friend Nona equally immortal, and takes over the chieftaincy of a tribe of latter-day Vikings. Incidentally, Gnome isn't going to stop there, for Omega, Mark, Nona, et al will be back from time to time in the rest of the "Minions" series.

Nope, humor and science fiction can't be mixed—except by Bond, Beyer, Pratt and de Camp, Asimov, and others whom our faithful readers will be only too glad to point out.

P. Schuyler Miller

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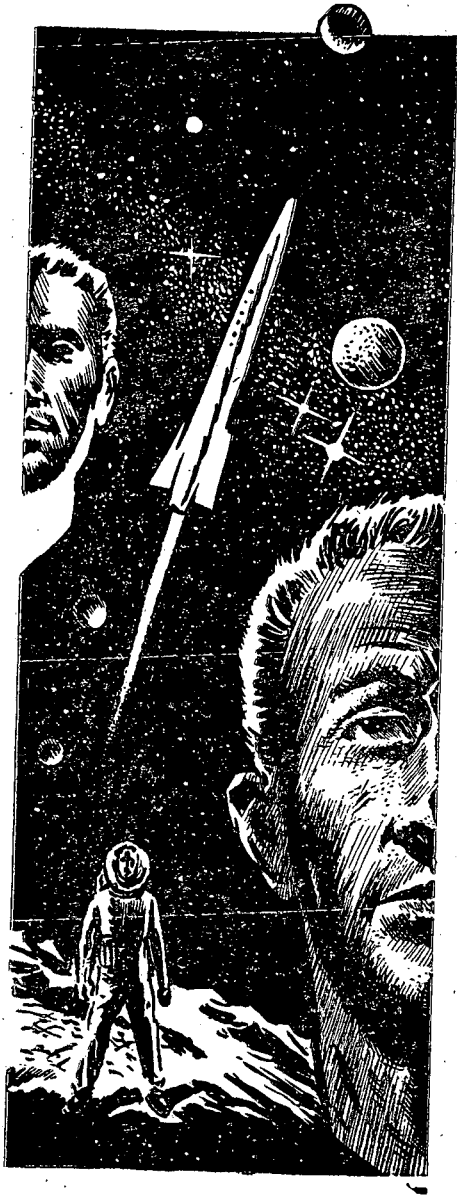

Rankin had a vision, and wher he saw a way to make it real, he sent messengers back to tell the people that it was all just

A MATTER of PERSPECTIVE

By

S. J. Byrne

DR. RANKIN looked at his watch and sighed. He removed his spectacles and rubbed the sore little indentations they had made on the bridge of his nose. He bent his snow white head a moment to scratch his scalp reflectively. Then he looked from the commissary coffee shop out onto the airfield again.

It was a quarter to ten P. M., and in fifteen minutes they would be called to board his ship. She was not his, exactly. The government had built her, as they had more use for a supersonic bomber than he

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did. But he had designed her. She was his most cherished brain child. And he was going up on her maiden flight along with the test crew of three.

He looked at her, concentrating to see something that should have been there, something that he had always dreamed would be there—but which was not.

She was beautiful—long, sleek, swift, powerful, as black as the night and as deadly as the isotopes she carried in her atomic engines. She was going to take wing and fly higher, farther and faster than anything ever built before in the history of Man.

As a young student of metaphysics and mathematics he had harbored the brave dream of modern times—that life was no longer a futile time of suffering and waiting for ultimate rewards in Heaven, that Man *could* conquer his environment and attain to a sort of godliness in the living present, building for himself a gracious utopian society that would be its own reward—on Earth.

As a middle-aged research engineer and teacher of aerodynamics he had been able to observe, in breath-taking reality, that the dream was not futile, that the means of attaining it were coming into factual existence. Blinded by the glittering realities of technological progress, he had added the products of his keen mentality to the Great Cause—to the physical conquest of Nature, so that Man might work less and have more leisure time for sacred thought and thus arrive at ever higher achievement.

He had always felt that to build such a ship as this one—the one out there on the field, which waited to take him on its wings and hurl him up to the borderline of empty space—would be the ultimate thrill of his life. It was to have been the end result and the shining pinnacle of all his ideals. In short, it was to have been the sheer embodiment of triumph.

But as an old man who had grown wise overnight, he knew that it was not.

Nor was there anything beyond this ship. He had no plan for greater things. He had reached his goal, but at the last moment, unexpectedly, everything had been clouded over by futility.

Why? Therein lay his feeling of frustration. He could not adequately define it.

There was nothing wrong with the ship. It was the symbology that lay there half concealed in its streamlined shape. Not that it was a bomber, a deadly instrument of destruction. That was deplorable enough, a bad enough sign of Man's failure to keep pace sociologically with the advance of technology. There was something deeper.

Perhaps, he thought, the answer lay in Man's attitude toward his growing failure in the midst of splendor. Nobody seemed to know or

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care.

So it was futile to reach for the stars when one's own back yard lay fallow. His shining ship was a strange paradox of success and failure rolled into one.

He sighed again and lifted his lukewarm coffee to his lips . . .

NEXT to him sat Sam, his flight captain. Big, lanky Sam with his long neck, heavy jaws and bushy black eyebrows. He had crinkly black hair, lots of it, which sometimes dropped a few of its crinkles, as it did now, down over his furrowed brow. His big, brown eyes were deep-set. You had to look twice to find all the things that were in them. Studiousness, anxious sincerity, calm capability, friendly understanding—and sadness.

Sam was studious because he was thirty-five, not yet even the middle-aged scientist that Rankin had once been when the latter had seen, as Sam did now, the reality of the dream. Man *could* conquer time and space. Sam was all for it. His life had become dedicated to Army research. He was in to stay. He was convinced that it was a perfect career.

But he was sad for purely personal reasons. In fact, he was frustrated, inwardly dissatisfied, almost a nervous wreck—all on account of Madge.

Madge was his wife. She was the peroxide blonde with the leopard skin coat and the very low neckline, down there at the end of the counter talking with Joe, his co-pilot. Of course she had come to see him off. Sam, her husband. But that would consist of a tired little hand-me-down kiss at the last moment before he took that monster of metal and hurled it into the upper reaches of the atmosphere. Something could happen up there. This was the first test flight and perhaps none of them would come back.

But while she was waiting to see him off and there were only ten minutes left — she was chinning with Joe. Sam could see her in the mirror behind the coffee counter and he watched her, deliberately.

He should have been reviewing his technical data: Thermocouples, critical temperatures, water injection pressures, electronic actuators, flaps, gears, boosters — and of the twelve ton simulated bomb load of mercury in canvas bags that he was going to lift fifty miles into the air and carrying around the world at three times the speed of sound.

But instead he was thinking: Whatever happened to her, anyway? She used to be—different. A good wife, a good companion. In fact, a sweetheart.

They had even had a child, but they had lost it, a premature baby boy, and Madge had refused to go through it again. At the same time he had begun getting big test flight bonuses, plenty of them. Money.

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That was it! That's what had changed Madge. The new house, the clothes and the new car. Good times and plenty of attention from other men. Sam didn't go for all the partying and drinking and dancing. There was too much to do. He had time for his family and the house, but none to waste on the bright lights.

However, Joe had time. Where Madge was concerned, he had too much of it . . . .

SAM clenched his right fist, hard. He wasn't as jealous as he was mad. What the hell!—he thought. She needs a good tanning, and he needs—

"Hey Chuck, you old brass monkey!"

His train of thought was broken by the conversation next to him as two buddies of his communications officer crowded in to see him off.

"Government stuff, chum, government stuff!"

Little, curly headed Chuck was drinking cokes and eating peanuts. He was typical of his clan—cocky, apathetic, always on the alert for the gold brick and the gravy train. To him this flight meant only another bonus and the fact that his natural talent for electronics was paying off. He was the best practical radar and communications man the Army had—that is, with the requisite set of iron nerves and the highest reliability ratings while under the pressure of emergency. Psychologically, he was *the* communications man for the flight.

"This is big stuff, Chuck. This ought to get you a first looey. You going to re-enlist?"

Chuck tossed down some more peanuts and laughed. "Hell no! My stretch is up in four weeks! When I'm out I'll stay out. I'm gonna buy me a convertible and drive it until I'm broke!"

"Yeah? And then what?"

He shrugged. "Pound brass on some South American airline, maybe. What have I got to lose?"

"*Everything.*"

Chuck and his two buddies looked at Sam, who was glowering at them.

"You've got everything to lose, Chuck," Sam continued, while old Rankin listened approvingly.

Chuck smirked happily and lifted his coke glass in a mock toast. "Here's to good old die-hard Sam!" he said. "Study hard and the Army will help you work harder all the time until you drop dead!"

Sam smiled, patiently. "You've got a lot to learn, Chuck. All I can hope for is that you'll never throw your talent away. You're an electronics wizard and don't know it!"

"But what of my social talents!" Chuck protested. "I'm thinking of the 'pick up' I'll have with a convertible—in every town and hamlet from L.A. to Hoboken!"

WHILE Chuck's buddies laughed with him, the radio on the back board was blaring forth with a dissertation on the latest world situa-

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tion:

"Russia today undermined the hopes of the Western Powers for a Big Four meeting in Paris by insisting on conditions which were unacceptable—"

"Oh for Pete's sake get some music on that thing or shut it off!" exclaimed Madge, petulantly. Whereupon she smiled at Joe, and Joe squeezed her hand, never taking his eyes from hers.

"You send me," he said, in his characteristic, soft undertone.

Madge cast a furtive glance at Sam in the mirror and saw that he was looking at his wristwatch. "Joe," she said quickly. "I can't stand it much longer! I'll get a divorce!"

Joe did not even look at Sam. His jaw muscles rippled a little and he squeezed her hand a little tighter. "He won't give you one," he said.

Madge's blue eyes widened with the nakedness of desire. "Joe! Think of me—when you're up there! Will you?"

Joe smiled his slow, unfathomable smile and caressed her with his half-closed eyes. "More than you'll know, baby! More than you'll know!"

Suddenly, the intercom sounded off: *"Flight time for XAB-1. Crew prepare to board!"*

It was ten P. M., and big Sam stood there in front of Madge and Joe with his deep-set eyes trying to cut both their throats at once.

"Joe," he said, "Let's go."

"Yeah," said Joe, who was also an Army Airforce captain. "Let's go. So long, Madge."

Madge lamely blushed a goodbye, because she knew Sam and she saw that he was mad. "Sam?" she said. "Don't I get a kiss or something? I came down to see you off and you haven't spent any time with me at all!"

Both of Sam's fists clenched, but he controlled his temper. "Goodbye, Madge," he answered. "We've got to go now. If you'll think of me—when I'm up there—I'll kiss you when I get back—*if* I get back!"

"Sam!" she called after him. But he walked away with the others and left her standing there with her mouth open and her dignity unraveled. Then she stamped her foot and looked daggers at him, but he was out of range. . . . . .

THE bomber was not cabin sealed. Instead, the crew wore rubberized, hermetically sealed, electrically heated oxygen suits. Two tanks on the back for each, and each tank good for two hours. In the tank magazines behind Joe were enough spares to last them all sixteen hours. Estimated flight time was eleven hours.

Each man, in his suit, was independent of the ship in case of an emergency or bail-out. Each had a parachute, radio-phone, and plenty of portable oxygen to get him back to Terra Firma even if one tank were empty.

But to Joe the most important point was that the tank magazine

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was under his control. He would be the one to issue fresh tanks as required. He had planned for weeks to take advantage of this fact. One of the tanks had a tell-tale dent on its coupling. That one did not have oxygen in it, even though it was *freshly* painted green. It was filled with pure CO_2. And at the proper time he would give it to Sam.

The proper time would arrive when they had come to flight test number four — the acceleration test. As Joe could remain conscious longer than the others under acceleration or deceleration, the Airforce had assigned him to Test Four. He was to take over and open up the atomic jets to see what the bomber's top speed and acceleration was. No one knew—not even Rankin. But theory said it might be about Mach 5.

Joe had thought it all out carefully. It would be really the perfect crime—each detail a masterpiece of perfection. He would wait until Sam switched to the bad tank of carbon dioxide, and before he could cry out for help Joe would hit the accelerator and flatten everybody out with a wide-open throttle. Chuck would not see them, as he would be in the next compartment aft. Rankin, he knew, would be out cold. It would be like drowning Sam in a bathtub without a struggle. Then, just before releasing the throttle, he would jerk Sam's front hose connection loose and let the rest of the CO_2 blow out, thus removing all trace of the evidence. And the explanation before any examining board later would be simple. Joe had made it a point to complain about the gyro-compass on the panel in front of them. He had said it was a dangerous protrusion, and nothing had been done about it. The whole tragedy of Sam's death could be blamed on the Airforce.

And Joe would have Madge all to himself, while Sam would have died being a hero in the service of his country. . . . . .

LIKE men prepared for interplanetary flight, they sat there in the black bomber, waiting for clearance from the control tower. There were no lights in the cabin—only black light to make the instruments fluoresce. Sam and Joe sat up front as pilot and co-pilot. Rankin sat behind them at a special instrument panel designed for use by the flight engineer. Chuck sat farther aft in the communications and navigation section, separated from them only by a semi-partition.

Back of Chuck was a hatch leading into the empty gunners' compartments and the bomb-bay sections. These were cross-braced with heavy steel strap to hold the ponderous simulated bomb load of mercury in thousands of small, special bags.

Joe sat there in the dark with his cold, clear thoughts and the dry, aching sensation of wanting a woman bad enough to commit murder. He watched Sam's expert hands on the overhead controls, tuning in the thermocouple readings off the engine

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piles to see their response as Rankin brought up the temperatures to critical. Not that they were critical in the fissionable sense. The pile temperatures were just hot enough to change water into a searing tornado of titanic force.

Sam's left hand rested now on the throttle, which was nothing more than a ganged control of the water injectors in the firing chambers.

Outside, Joe could see the cleared airfield and the long line of the strip lights inviting them into the night sky. But he was not interested in the sky. His thoughts and emotions were chained to Earth and a woman.

"XAB-1 to Control Tower," came Chuck's call over their radio-phones. "Estimated take-off time seventeen twenty Zebra, carrying simulated bomb load of twelve thousand pounds of mercury—multiple enclosed. Fuel aboard ten thousand units APU. Crew of four. Destination global non-stop to point of departure, course Great Circle with intermittent radar clocking contracts as specified in technical order fifty-two, eight seven H sixteen. Estimated cruising velocity, Mach 3—"

He droned on, with a composure that was maddening to Rankin and Sam.

Ye gods!—thought Sam. You'd think we were doing a Honolulu junket in a B-29! But then he remembered. Chuck didn't want the sky. He wanted a convertible.

But what did *Joe* want? Was he really after Madge? His hand tightened on the throttle knob. Madge could rot—he thought—before he'd give either of them the satisfaction!

"Tower to XAB-1. You are cleared to take off and proceed as scheduled." Then, while Rankin and Joe watched Sam's left hand on the throttle, the voice from the tower suddenly became human. It said, "Good luck, men!"

Sam's left hand came back, while his right hand clutched the half-wheel on the stick, steady as a rock—

THERE was a roar as though the earth had been shaken by the blast of Doom. Before they were aware of much forward movement, the heavy bomber was in the air and climbing like a jet fighter. Below and far behind, the field lights became lost in the still, dwindling carpet of illumination that was Burbank — then Greater Los Angeles.

No one spoke during acceleration. They were waiting to break Mach-1 and the Barrier—the speed of sound.

Only Chuck spoke, on the phone, to their point of departure. Then he established CW contact and there was silence again, while Sam, Joe and Rankin watched the meters climb.

"Come on, you guys," said Chuck after a while. "Give with the technics. I'm spinning tape and I gotta send the readings."

Rankin had been noticing how the crude realities of Man's world were quickly erased with altitude, to the point where a sort of land mist cover-

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ed up the blemishes and left one looking down upon a vast, sleeping planet that represented itself as a masterpiece of the Creator—a thing of beauty that would remain as it was now long after Man had passed away and his mighty civilizations had been buried in the dust of Eternity.

But suddenly he rememberd the recorder tape—and Chuck—and his scientific colleagues way back there in Burbank.

"Airspeed," he said, "five hundred and fifty-two. Altitude eleven thousand feet. Still climbing and still accelerating, at seventeen thirty Zebra . . . ."

ONE HOUR later, the XAB-1 had reached an altitude of fifty miles, well into the isothermosphere, thus shattering all records for man-carrying vehicles. Also, it had shattered all official speed records, topping twenty-one hundred miles per hour. Up there the atmosphere was almost undetectable, and without their high velocity of control surfaces would not have responded at all. Below them the Pacific Ocean formed a starless firmament of blackness, whereas above them the blazing universe seemed to represent the countless lights of an endless city.

"That's Metropolis Heaven up there," said Rankin, "where all the people dwell who have ever lived."

Sam caught the impression and added, "There's a light for every one of them."

"Do you think there's one up there with my name on it?" asked Chuck.

"Maybe so," said Sam. "But no convertibles."

"Oh I don't know. I could go for one of those comets."

"Are you guys nuts!" put in Joe, irritably.

"Yeah," Chuck replied. "The higher we get, the nutsier! Ever heard about guys going sky-happy due to altitude?"

"Sure, but that's a factor connected with air pressure and oxygen consumption. We've got pressurized suits on! Why should we react to the altitude? I'm not nuts up here. You're nuts because that's your normal state, anyway!"

"No," said Sam, "there's a reaction up here—a sort of—change of perspective. Don't you feel it? The farther we get away from the ground, the less the trivial things seem to matter. I mean, like the cost of eggs, or whether the guy down the street has two cars to my one. Up here it seems only the big things are left."

"Yeah," said Chuck. "I seem to have left all my little wishes behind. Here it's like Sam says. Only the big things count—like my convertible." He sighed while Sam winced.

"But men, said Rankin, "This is a very noteworthy observation! With the atmospheric factor held constant by virtue of our pressurized suits, we are still affected by altitude. Therefore, there is an unsuspected factor. I wonder—"

"What?" said Sam

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"I wonder what psychological experiences will be recorded by the men who first depart from the gravitational influence of the planet."

"We're all going batty," said Joe. "Hey Chuck, have you contacted the next clocking Station?"

"Yeah. Kwajalein down in the Marshalls is reading us, and I think Com Mar on Guam is picking us up. We sure must be making headlines!"

"We're making history!" corrected Rankin. "With atomic powered bombers like this, ideologies may come and go, but the United States of America can protect its freedoms forever."

"Tra-la-la-la-la!" chirped Chuck. "Who wants coffee?"

"Who wants some oxygen?" asked Joe, opening the tank magazine behind him. "Test Two coming up."

He was really thinking of Test Four, and his pen-light searched back among the life-giving cylinders to pick out again the bottle he was saving for Sam—the one with the shiny little dent on its coupling . . . .

LATER, somewhere over Inner Mongolia, Sam turned to Joe. "Okay, Joe," he said. "You take over. We're ready for Test Four."

Now that the crucial moment had arrived, Joe was the opposite of what he had feared he would be. Instead of nervous, he was icy calm and deliberate.

"Okay," he said. "But we better all check our tanks. Can't change 'em during the test. Any customers?"

Four bottles back on the rack was Death, disguised as an oxygen cylinder.

"I'll take a spare," said Chuck.

Death was the third bottle back, while the heavily laden bomber shot smoothly onward through the soundless night—and Joe sweated.

"How about you, Rankin?"

Rankin was occupied with his safety straps.

"Rankin!"

"Hmm? Oh—ah, yes. I'd better have one."

Death moved from third place to second.

"I think I'll have a change, too," said Joe.

"You just took one fifteen minutes ago," replied Sam, who was checking the instruments and the controls.

Or *was* he looking at the panel? In the darkness, encased in the space suits, it was difficult to tell what anybody was watching. Now, for the first time, Joe's pulse began to quicken. He was getting nervous.

"Just a precaution," he answered, a little too quickly. "This test is going to be a physical strain, or hadn't they told you? I want all I can get to breathe." Whereupon he took the last good tank before the CO_2 bottle.

Just as he connected it to his suit, however, Chuck said, "Better give me another one, too, then."

Joe could hear and feel his pulse in his head. It pounded fast and hard. "Don't you want one, Sam?"

"I don't think so."

On a sudden impulse, Joe took a

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:hance. "If this is my test, I'll take :harge," he said. "Here's a fresh :ank!"

Before Sam could object, Joe had placed *the* bottle on the other's back and inserted the used bottle in the magazine for empties. Then he quickly handed a fresh, good tank to Chuck.

"Okay," he said, cutting off any possible remark by Sam. "Safety straps checked? Send the signal, Chuck, and we'll open 'er up!"

Sam made no attempt to switch on his new tank, which was just as well, Joe thought. At the proper time, he'd switch it on *for* him.

"All right, Joe," said Rankin. "Test Four is cleared to proceed. The recorders are on."

Joe's right hand hesitated on the throttle. Suddenly he realized that the others were right about the altitude reaction. Strangely, it was occurring to him that he no longer wanted to kill Sam. Something made him want to change his plans. He remembered his student days with Sam, who had been his instructor. Sam had been patient with him, helped him through many an exam when he could have been taking it easy on hot, summer afternoons.

He shook his head. It was the starlight or something. He was sky-happy. That was it! So he'd cling to his down-to-Earth horse sense. He made a supreme effort to concentrate on Madge—Madge, passionately wanting him. Madge, the way he desired her, in his arms.

He gritted his teeth and pulled back on the throttle and everybody began at once to recede into the cushions. The specially designed isothermo airspeed indicator began to read Mach 4—four times the speed of sound. The needle climbed faster and faster, indicating also their increasing rate of acceleration, and as it did so their senses began to swim.

Joe was aware of Rankin's face sagging against his vision plate. His wrinkled physiognomy was ghastly white in the brilliant starlight that reached them now in the cabin.

At Mach 5, Joe looked over at Sam. The latter was very still, but Joe caught the glitter of his deep-set eyes as he doggedly watched the instruments. Joe felt like his spine had changed places with his stomach and his head was under a steam roller. Wouldn't Sam ever conk out?

Viciously, he jabbed the throttle back some more, and blackness swirled before his eyes. When he could see Sam again he knew the other's eyes were closed. He had conked out, momentarily.

Now to make it for good, he thought. Gritting his teeth with the strain, he locked the throttle in place and began to reach for the control valve on Sam's chest. One twist of the selector knob, and Sam would be taking in CO_2—pure carbon dioxide. He had to support his arm on Sam's shoulder, while his gloved fingers crept across his victim's chest toward the knob, fighting the terrific pressure of acceleration. This was

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acceleration which had been built into the design of the ship to save lives, to take the bomber out of range of self-guided, automatic rocket bombs. But Joe was using that great engineering achievement for another purpose . . . . .

ALL of a sudden, however, Joe looked outside, and his mouth dropped agape. There was no more horizon of dark Earth and blazing stars. No horizon at all— just stars alone. He looked at the gyro-horizon and the inclinometer. Then terror gripped him.

At six thousand miles per hour they were climbing straight up! Something had gone wrong with the controls! He looked at the radar altimeter. It read five hundred and thirty thousand feet—over one hundred miles up!

Drawing in his breath quickly he brought his hand back to the throttle. He pushed his stick forward and released the throttle lever entirely.

But there was no response.

"Hey!" he yelled. But from his companions—also no response. "Hey!" he yelled again. "We're going out into *space!*"

As though it were a subconscious action, Sam began to reach slowly for the air tank selector knob on his chest. Which only served to terrify Joe all the more. Something was wrong with the ship's controls and Sam was the expert on flying. Sam, his instructor! He needed Sam! Sam couldn't die now!

"Sam!" he yelled, almost screeching. "*Sam!*" He pulled Sam's hand away from the knob. "Wake up! Here! I'll give you a fresh tank!"

"Got one," said Sam, groggily.

"No! I mean—the coupling looks like it's stripped or something. Here —take this one! And wake up quick! Something's wrong!"

The acceleration rate lessened somewhat, and with it the deadening pressure. Sam stirred and sat up, with a pair of good oxygen tanks on his back.

"Hey you guys!" shouted Chuck, his voice rattling in the phones. "Our flight plan calls for Burbank, not Mars! Where we going? What's going on around here? Do I have to drive this crate myself?"

Sam immediately perceived their position. He grabbed the controls and manipulated them expertly. But there was still no response.

"Well?" persisted Chuck. "What's the verdict?"

"Sam!" cried Joe, in a cold sweat. "Can't you figure it out? Make it snappy, for the love of God! We're climbing right out into space! In fact, we're out there now! We're up eight hundred miles!"

They looked at the special outside thermometer and saw that the column had dropped out of sight below the scale limit, which was one hundred degrees minus zero Fahrenheit. They turned up the rheostats on their electrical heating units. The cold of interplanetary space surrounded them.

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Sam remained silent for a moment. Then, quietly, he said, "Try to shake Rankin awake."

Joe reached over and shook the old man desperately. "Rankin!" he shouted. "Rankin! Wake up!"

Finally, the engineer stirred. "Hm? What? Oh—yes. Test Four. How are you—" It was then that he sat bolt upright. "We're climbing toward zenith!" he exclaimed. "What's the matter!"

"Lost control," said Sam. "Better figure it out quick or we'll be four orphans. We're leaving the Earth!"

"I'm afraid I know what it is," said Rankin. "I fought against mercury ballast. I wanted lead, but General Spinner insisted on the mercury."

"What's that got to do with it?" demanded Joe.

"I get you," said Sam. "Our acceleration must have shifted the load and torn some bags. Mercury has leaked below and aft and shorted out all our electrically actuated controls. We can't navigate. Even if we could work the controls they'd have no effect in a vacuum. Let's try turning off the engines."

"I've tried that," put in Joe. "No use. All controls are dead!"

Chuck had climbed forward, and he did it with remarkable ease, as the gravitational pull of the Earth was diminishing.

"According to the inverse-square law," said Rankin, "We're losing weight fast. As we lose weight, our acceleration increases again, with engine thrust at constant maximum. Look! The speed indicator is dead. No air. Extrapolating the radar altimeter readings I'd say we were going ten thousand miles per hour!"

"Chuck!" cried Joe. "Get on that radio!. Tell 'em what happened!."

"Are you kidding!. Our transmitter can't break down through Heavyside. We're out of contact, brother!"

Joe turned to Sam and grasped his arm. "Sam! What are we going to do!"

"You're losing your grip, Joe. Take it easy."

"Take it easy! We're going off the deep end, physically! We're as good as dead right now unless we can think of something quick! We're fifteen hundred miles above the Earth. Look! The Earth is a sphere!"

"That's what Columbus tried to tell Isabella," put in Chuck. "All right!" he countered, as the other three whirled about to glare at him. "So I'm a clown, and I'll let you geniuses do the thinking!"

"Well, Doc?" said Sam to Rankin. What's your suggestion?"

Rankin was looking back at the great, beautiful, enhaloed sphere of the Earth. "We're just plain out of control," he said. "It may sound impractical of me, but my suggestion is—as long as we have to die sometime or other, why not go out like this?"

Joe grunted in his effort to get hold of Rankin and shake him. "Are you crazy!" he yelled.

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"Take it easy, Joe!" Sam restrained Joe's arms with his hands.

"No," answered Rankin. "Maybe I'm saner than all of you. Why go back to life again?—for what purpose? To scuttle through a mad, self-indulgent rat race, responding only like so many brainless amoebas to the stereotyped stimuli of a technological, devitaminized Utopia that is but a robe of mockery for the dead Corpse of idealism? For my money, I'll take glorious death—out here in the Infinite!"

"Broth-*er!*" was Chuck's only comment.

"You see!" shrieked Joe. "He's mad! Mad! Sam, *do* something!"

"Shut up!" said Sam. "Now listen to me, all of you. Doc's only the designer of this crate. I'm the flight captain, and I'll tell you what we've got to do—that is, if we want to have a chance of coming out of this alive."

"What is it? I'll do anything!" shouted Joe.

"Yeah," put in Chuck "I feel reckless myself tonight. You name it, Sam."

Sam paused a moment. Then he said, simply, "What is normal procedure when a ship gets out of control?"

This question was followed by a dead silence.

Then Sam said, *"We bail out!"*

"No! Not from up here!" exclaimed Joe. "We'd smash to atoms falling free through space!"

"Earth still has an atmosphere," said Sam. "And you have a spac suit, oxygen, and a parachute. Wha else do you want? What do yo think of our chances, Doc?"

Rankin sighed. "It's the onl chance you have," he said. "Bu you'd better bail out soon or you momentum will carry you beyonc Earth's gravitational influence. We're two thousand miles out now. By the time you slow down and start to fall back toward Earth you may be five or six thousand miles out. You may make it, as we still haven't reached the theoretical velocity of escape, although I'd say we were doing fifteen thousand miles per hour and accelerating faster every minute."

"How long would we take to fall?"

"All I can say, Sam, is that each man should take all the spare oxygen cylinders he can hold onto. You may have a chance. Incidentally, we are somewhere over Europe. You'd not drop into the Atlantic, so the possibilities are good, if the Earth's atmosphere can slow your chutes sufficiently."

"Wait a miute," said Sam. "You talk like you're not coming with us."

"Why should I? I'm old. This bomber is my crowning achievement. I want to go out this way."

"I'm sorry, Doc. As flight captain I'm responsible—"

"I'm not going, Sam. Please don't make me. Besides, there aren't enough oxygen tanks left. You three will need all you can carry. I tell you I want it this way. You should

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be able to see my point, Sam. Back on Earth I have no rewards—money and acclaim, perhaps—only all that same old flim-flam that I can't take with me. But *this!*—this atomic ride to Glory surrounded by the glittering pillars of Creation—I can take *this* with me! It's my reward, Sam. Don't take it away from me! Just—leave me two oxygen tanks."

Sam looked at Rankin for a long while. Then he turned to the other two.

"Prepare to bail out," he said. "Joe, divide up the fresh tanks between the three of us. And leave two for Doc."

"But you can't leave a guy out here just because he's lost his marbles!" said Chuck. "You'd be court-martialed!"

"We didn't leave him," said Sam. "That is, let's just say—he was dead when we left him. The acceleration was too much for his heart. Besides, Doc is right. Four of us wouldn't make it. We need all the oxygen we can get."

"Well," said Joe, "if bailing out is our only chance, let's go!"

As Sam prepared to go aft with the other two, Rankin detained him. "Thanks, Sam," he said.

"Okay, Doc. Maybe we'll meet up again sometime . . . And Doc—"

"Yes?"

"I understand. In fact—"

"You don't have to say it. I understand, too, Sam. But you've got to go back. You know that."

"So long, Doc."

"So long, Sam."

SAM could not have described his sensations, falling free in a space suit, out in the depths of the interplanetary void. Falling *away* from Earth. He could only hope that their momentum would not carry them too far—that they could still be brought to a halt by gravitation and pulled back to Mother Earth.

He gyrated slowly, and at times he could see the four white jets of the bomber as it drew away from them, carrying old Doc Rankin into Eternity. About one hundred feet on either side of him were his companions, also gyrating slowly.

In one direction lay the great, globular wall of Earth, glowing on one half of its breadth in the rays of the full moon. He thanked God the sun was hidden from them by the planet, as otherwise they would have been cooked by now.

"Say Sam!" came Chuck's voice in his earphones.

"Yes?"

"Doc was right about this altitude business. It's made a new man out of me!"

"What do you mean?"

"Believe it or not, I can see there are more important things in life than driving a convertible and spending my dough on dames!"

"This is the end."

"No—seriously! Down on Earth everything's a grab bag. Each guy grabs what he can. And it's true

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about the mad rat race. Each of us jumps through a hoop to the dictates of personal necessity, and we brawl for our chance at the great big Grab Bag, from breakfast to bedtime, and it's all stereotyped and meaningless. It's because we don't get a chance to think, like you do out here. If we do find a moment of leisure in which we could meet ourselves face to face we surround ourselves with a circle of cigarette butts and say we're going nuts! So we rush out and put a nickel in a juke-box and order up a drink, to *kill* time, so that we can bridge the gap over to the next period of automatic response to stereotyped stimuli. What's gone wrong with the world? We just don't *think!*"

"You amaze me, Chuck. But you're right. Up here I not only have time to think. I feel bigger—like I'm not afraid to admit that I still have ideals and believe in things like Faith, Hope and Charity. It's a wonderful sensation, really. What is it?"

"*I'll tell you.*"

It was Doc Rankin's voice, transmitted to them from the receding bomber.

"Yipes!" exclaimed Chuck. "I forgot Doc had the transmitter and receiver all to himself. I thought you were a ghost, Doc!"

"I've got it figured out," came Doc's voice. "Take it back with you, boys. Here it is. A basic memory, conditioning and instinct in us ties us all, from birth, to our mothers. As infants, we cling to mother for protection and we obtain sustenance from her. As children we turn to her for further protection and guidance. But as adults we are forced to be on our own. Yet we can't get away from our instinct to turn to mother. We can't do that, actually, but subconsciously our minds create a substitute. The Earth, itself, is mother to us all! We turn to *her* for protection and sustenance. Gravity, itself, is the protecting embrace of Mother Earth. We speak of having our feet planted on solid ground. We like that concept because it's reassuring. It gives us 'balance'—or so we think.

"The real fact is, gravity gives us a unidirectional perspective—toward the Earth, and toward ourselves. Now then, out here where the force of gravitation is light, our unidirectional perspectives have changed, and we are aware of the expansive perspective of the Infinite. Only the minority of Earthmen are strong enough to resist the psychological conditioning of gravity and yearn for the stars, and you are one of them, Sam. Now even Chuck has relinquished his materialistic goals. Man's only road to godliness is from Finite —*from being bound to Earth*—to Infinite! When you get back to Earth, try to remember—and resist the unidirectional conditioning of gravitation. Help your fellow men to look to the stars!"

"Doc, you've got something," said Chuck. "Hey! What do you sup-

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pose the United Nations delegates could do out here! Someday men may realize the truth about gravity and establish their most important tribunals on artificial satellites—way out in space, where gravity is weak and men can think of *men* rather than the Big Grab bag."

"Joe," said Sam, "what is your opinion?"

"It—it's all so screwy," replied Joe. "But I follow you guys. Maybe up here we're sane, and down below we're nuts. Maybe I'm sky-happy, but—I like it better out here. Now I can understand why Doc didn't want to bail out."

"It's kind of like a miracle," said Sam.

"Sam."

"Yes, Joe?"

"I'll tell you what a fool a guy can be. Can you imagine? I tried to kill you!"

"When?"

"Back there, during Test Four."

"But why, Joe?"

"I—I wanted Madge for myself. I thought I had to have her."

Sam was silent for a long moment. Then he said, "And now what do you think about it?"

"Well, out here it's so simple. You think of the other guy as well as yourself. Down there it's the Grab Bag, like Chuck says. You want something and you've got to have it, no matter what. But up here—"

"Yes?"

"The answer comes easy. Madge is your wife. Period. There are a lot more where she came from."

HOURS later, the three men lost contact with Rankin. They knew he was dead. But they did not feel sorry for him. They couldn't.

As they penetrated the upper reaches of the Earth's atmosphere, their chutes began to open. Slowly, they felt their straps tighten as the chutes bellied out and began to slacken their fall.

"I think we'll make it," said Sam. "When we hit the troposphere we'll get pulled up hard, but we've got a chance of living through it."

Just then, Joe screamed.

"What's the matter!" yelled Sam.

"My last tank!" screamed Joe.

"What about it? I'm on my last one, too, but that's enough to last."

"I know, but this one—*it has a dent on the coupling!*"

"So what!"

"It's no good! I mean, I made a mistake! Instead of putting it in the disposal rack I put it back in the use rack! *I* took it!"

"You mean you've got an empty?"

"No—I mean, yes! Sam—Chuck! I'm out of air!"

Joe screamed, coughed, then groaned, as he suffocated. "I don't want to die! I want to live! I gotta right—to live!" More coughing and gasping—then, deliriously. "Madge, baby! Ma-a-adge!"

Sam and Chuck could do nothing. Three minutes passed while the two of them yelled at Joe. But he did not reply. Only the cold wind whistled

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about their helmets and Joe's limp form dangled loosely in its straps as his parachute brought him back toward Mother Earth . . . .

TWO DAYS later, in a Paris hospital, they rolled Sam's bed over alongside Chuck's. Chuck had both of his legs in casts and up in the air. His right arm was in splints and his head was in bandages. But his one good hand held an old-fashioned bottle of Coca Cola.

"How do you feel, Chuck?" Sam asked him.

"Great! It's pretty good to be back on old Mother Earth again, isn't it?"

Sam raised his eyebrows, quizzically. "Have you forgotten so soon?"

"Forgotten what?"

"What we experienced—out *there*."

"Oh that! Boy, you sure get sky-happy up there, don't you? Well, thank the Lord it's all over and we can get back to being normal. Say look, Sam, look at this picture in this French magazine."

"What is it?"

"It's just what I've always wanted —a French convertible!"

THE END

Stf Trader is a fan magazine devoted exclusively to buy, sell and swap ads of stf and fantasy nature. For a sample copy, send five cents to Jack Irwin, Box 3, Tyro, Kansas . . . *John Davis*, 931 *E. Navajo Rd, Tucson, Arizona wants early PS, SS, TWS; STEFCARDS* 1-8, 10, & 12-15; *Vol I of ORB; ODD* 1-6; *pre* '48 *WT*; *BEM* 1-2; *QUANDRY* 1-3 & 7; *FANTASY STORIES May* '50; *Doc Savage mags, first issue of CYCLE*; *ditto MOTOR TREND; and back SPACEWARP; S-F NEWSLETTER; LE ZOMBIE, SPACEWAYS, GLOM, THE GORGON, SUN SPOTS, FANTASY COMMENTATOR or any other fmz; CURIOUS TALES* 1-4; *the address of the nearest Cult of Ghu* . . . Anyone knowing of a fan club or interested in starting one in Milwaukee contact Tony Martinich, 1235A W. Washington St, Milwaukee 4, Wisc. Phone Evergreen 3-3732 . . . *Ray Hunter*, 811 *Madison, Great Bend, Kansas has many aSFs from* '39 *and most FFMs from* '45, *both to date, for sale at reasonable prices* . . . . Need FATE Vol I No. 4, good condition and Avon Fantasy Reader No. 5. Will trade any of the following: aSF Jan '41; UNKNOWN Jan '40 (no front cover), Apr & June '41, Oct '43; WT Dec '39 (front cover partly torn), May '40, Sept '42, Mar '43, Jan, Mar & May '44, Jan & Mar '45 . . . *Would like to find people owning stf mags and books they would like to sell. Immediate checks for suitable items, particularly aSF and UNKNOWN. I also have aSF & UNKNOWN to sell, plus other older mags. W. H. Moore*, 416 *N. Beech, Little Rock, Ark* . . . All stf fans in the areas of Dorchester and Brookline Mass.

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between 15 & 18 who are interested in joining a new stf club please get in touch with Robert Swartz, 106 Floyd St, Dorchester, Mass. (If during July & Aug, 52 M St., Nantasket, Mass.) Phone AV 2-3395 . . . *Anyone interested in corresponding about or experimenting in rocketry, please write Bob Swartz, address previously given* . . . Bob is also interested in finding a pen-pal, male or female, who is interested in stf. Bob is almost 16 . . . *Wants back issues of AS, FA, and PS. If you have any, please write Bob Goodney,* 700 *Ellis Ave, Ashland, Wisc* . . . Alfred Guillory, Jr, Box 38 Chataignier, La wants the TARZAN color newspaper comics for the years 1940-'47, and '48 prior to Nov. 21. Will pay 10c for 25 and 40c for 100. Also wants the book THE TARZAN TWINS in good condition. Will take daily newspaper TARZAN comics of any dates. Wants TARZAN Comic Books No. 1, 2 and 4 . . . *Am selling out my collection, over* 300 *mags including OW, Madge, aSF, FFM, FN, TWS, WT, PS, AS, SS, Golden Fleece, Ghost Stories, Dynamic, and many others. Send want list or write for price list. Jack Marsh,* 1205 *Haltom St, Jonesboro, Ark* . . . Will trade from the following mags for any pre '49 aSF or any UNKNOWN: aSF Jan, Feb, Mar, May, July, Sept, Nov & Dec '49; Mar, Apr, June, Sept, Oct, Nov & Dec '50; Jan, Feb, Apr & May '51. Galaxy Nov '50; Jan, Feb, Mar & May '51. Fantasy & Science Fiction, Winter-Spring '50 and Feb '51. Gary Aldrich, 11 Buena Vista, Mill Valley, California . . . *Wanted: Names & addresses of Indiana fans; aSF* '44-'48; *any UNKNOWNS. Will buy or trade: OW Galaxy, Mag of Fantasy & Stf, Imagination (complete) and odd issues of various mags. Jerry Hunter,* 4612 *E New York St, Indianapolis* 1, *Indiana* . . . Ken F. Slater, 13 Gp. R.P.C., B.A.O.R., 15, c/o G.P.O., England writes: A lad by the name of W. A. Barnes, 203 Hammer, Sapulpa, Okla sent me umpteen mags in exchange for a textbook. I wrote him a letter, sent the book, and wrote an airmail letter. Both letters and the book came back marked "not known" or "wrong address". So if Barnes or anyone knowing him reads this, won't you please send me his right address . . . *Jim Gartland,* 394 *Dieppe St, Welland, Ontario, Canada has a supply of stf mags and other mags for sale. Advise your wants* . . . I am publishing an index of all fantasy/stf prozines which will list & number stories, articles, editorials, departments, letter-writers, etc. To complete it I will have to buy, trade for or borrow the following mags: Thrill Book Vol I No. 1, 2, 3 and 6; WT Vol I No. 2, 3, Vol II No. 3 & 4; Mind Magic Vol I No. 1, 2 & 4; My Self Vol I No. 5; Doctor Death Vol I No. 3; Terence X. O'Leary's War Birds, Mar, Apr & June '35; Oriental Stories Vol I No. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 & Vol II No. 1; Magic Carpet Vol III No. 1, Vol IV No. 1. Am also in the market for other issues, in good condition, of these mags. Walter Coslet, Box 6, Helena, Montana . . . *Iris Cribbs,* 2417 *Graham St, Wichita* 14, *Kansas has for sale or trade: aSF May, June & July* '47, *Jan* '49, *Oct, Nov & Dec* '50, *and all of* '51 *to date; Oct* '50 *OW; FA Aug* '48, *Feb Oct & Nov* '49; *AS Nov* '48 *plus copies of* '49 *and* '51 *issues;* '51 *Galaxy, OW, Super Science, Marvel, Future, Worlds Beyond and many others* . . . Frank Richards, 4, Hebers, Middleton, Manchester, Lancashire, England will trade British stf pocket-books and mags for American science-fiction books (not weird or horror tales). Would also like American pen-pals, especially any aspiring authors .

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The MYSTERY of PLANET X

By Willy Ley

Is there another planet, as yet undiscovered? Here is an absorbing study on that subject by one of the most noted of today's investigators.

A LONG time ago something violent and very much out of the ordinary happened in the outskirts of our solar system. So far we have not succeeded in figuring out just what happened. And naturally we also can't say when. It might have been twenty thousand years ago, or at the time of Christ or even a year before the invention of the telescope. But that something did take place is obvious, because we are slowly becoming acquainted with the astronomical confusion that was left behind.

Because we don't know the whole story yet and can't fix a date, let's begin with the 13th of March, 1781. During that night Sir William Herschel in England saw a star where no star should be. He first thought that it might be a comet, but it turned out to be a planet, the first planet which has a definite discoverer. All the other planets had been known from antiquity and up to that night all astronomers, including Sir William, had been convinced that ringed Saturn was the outermost planet of the solar system. The new planet, Uranus, was observed eagerly—and after a number of years it turned out that it was not punctual. It did not always arrive on its orbit where caluculation had said it should for a given night. Sometimes it was a little slow, sometimes a little fast.

Astronomers only had to realize the fact itself to conceive a strong suspicion of what caused these irregularities. Obviously there was still another planet farther out. Urbain J. J. Leverrier in Paris and John Couch Adams in England both tried to calculate the position of the unknown planet. John C. Adams had the bad luck that the astronomer who was entrusted with the actual search was careless and apparently not much interested in the whole business. We know now that he could have found the then still unknown planet Neptune. But he didn't. Leverrier of Paris sent his calculations to his colleague, Galle, of the Urania Observatory in Berlin and Galle found the new planet almost immediately. The date was September 23, 1846 and before the year had run its course, astronomers knew that Neptune had at least one large moon,

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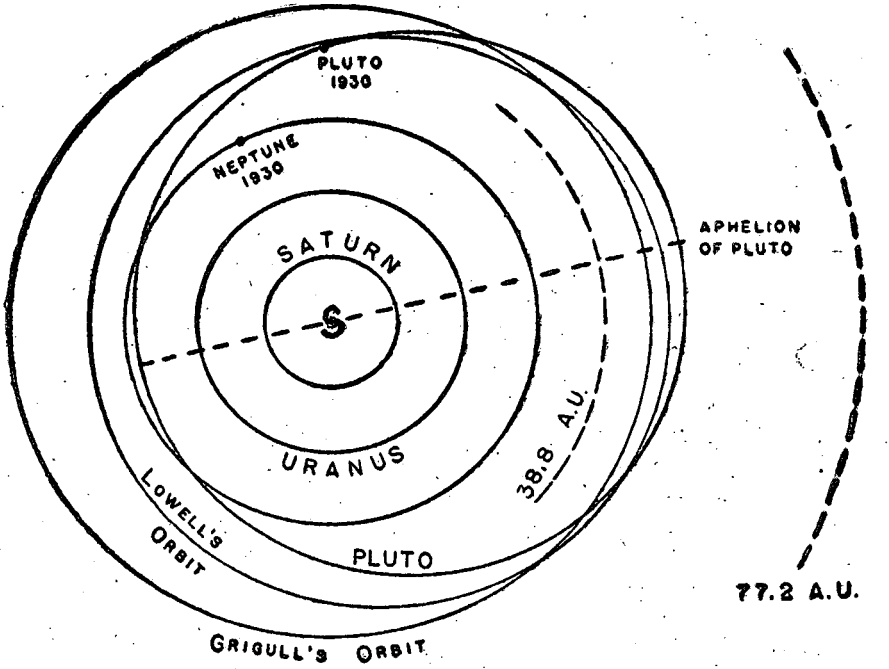

"Planet X," the planet beyond Neptune, had been predicted to in an orbit somewhat beyond 45 A. U. (astronomical units). The diagram shows two of these predicted orbits, that of Percival Lowell and of Theodore Grigull. The actual orbit of Pluto resembles neither of the two. If the Bode-Titius rule held strictly true, Neptune would be in the orbit at 38.8 A. U. while Planet X would be in the orbit at 77.2 A. U. Many astronomers now feel that Pluto is NOT Planet X.

Triton. (A second and far smaller moon was not discovered until 1949, by Dr. G. P. Kuiper.)

When discovered, Neptune seemed to be very close to the place where Leverrier had said it should be. But as observation continued it was found that Leverrier's prediction had gone wrong in a very interesting manner. He had thought that the distance of the planet from the sun should be around 4000 million miles. But it was "only" 3675 million miles, Neptune was somewhat closer than suspected. That had not hampered the discovery; seen from the Earth, from inside the solar system, the planet Neptune was in the right direction; that the line of sight was shorter did not matter.

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And Leverrier had already assumed that Neptune was much closer than a certain rule indicated. That "Bode-Titius Rule," as it is called, might be just an amusing coincidence, or it might be an accidentally discovered application of a still undiscovered physical law. To understand the rule it is only necessary to know that astronomers often use the mean distance of the earth from the sun —93 million miles—as a yardstick which is called A. U. or, spelled out, astronomical unit.

One can see at a glance that the rule holds true very nicely up to and including Uranus. From then on it begins to go wrong. Astronomers, of course, do not rely on that rule, just because there is no proof yet that the rule is *not* a coincidence. But they had other reasons for suspecting that even Neptune was not the outermost planet. Neptune itself had been found because Uranus did not live up to the mathematics of the case. But even when the influence of Neptune was taken into consideration, Uranus still did not conform properly. As for Neptune itself it is too early to tell, Neptune needs 164.8 of our years to complete a full revolution. It has gone only a little more than half way around the sun since its discovery. To hang a really useful calculation on Neptune's orbit alone, one would need careful observations of at least two full revolutions. Astronomers are a patient lot, but nobody was willing to wait that long.

In addition to the fact that Uranus' orbit was still influenced by something unknown, there existed another indication. Comets do look large and spectacular on occasion, but their real mass is that of a small mountain. In the majority of the cases their mass is less than that even of a very small mountain. Therefore, if a comet passes close by a planet, the massive planet completely ruins the comet's orbit, without being influenced in the least itself. Astronomers could cite cases, they even distinguished "cometary families," speaking of the comets which had been profoundly perturbed by Jupiter, or by

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THE BODE-TITIUS RULE:

4 + (0 x 3) / 10 =	0.4 ;	MERCURY,	actual distance	0.39	A. U.
4 + (1 x 3) / 10 =	0.7 ;	VENUS,	actual distance	0.72	A. U.
4 + (2 x 3) / 10 =	1.0 ;	EARTH,	actual distance	1.00	A. U.
4 + (4 x 3) / 10 =	1.6 ;	MARS,	actual distance	1.52	A. U.
4 + (8 x 3) / 10 =	2.8 ;	CERES,	actual distance	2.77	A. U.
4 + (16 x 3) / 10 =	5.2 ;	JUPITER,	actual distance	5.20	A. U.
4 + (32 x 3) / 10 =	10.0 ;	SATURN,	actual distance	9.45	A. U.
4 + (64 x 3) / 10 =	19.6 ;	URANUS,	actual distance	19.19	A. U.
4 + (128 x 3) / 10 =	38.8 ;	NEPTUNE,	actual distance	30.07	A. U.
4 + (256 x 3) / 10 =	77.2 ;	PLUTO,	actual distance	29.00-42.00	A. U.
4 + (512 x 3) / 10 =	154.0 ;	X	actual distance	???	

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Saturn, or by Earth. Then the French astronomer Camille Flammarion pointed to a comet the orbit of which had decidedly been "perturbed." But the planet which had done it must be situated outside the orbit of Neptune.

Flammarion did not follow up his own suggestion, but other astronomers did and they found two small "families" of comets, belonging, in all probability, to two different planets beyond Neptune. Of course mistakes are always possible, but the remaining irregularities of Uranus, plus suspected irregularities of Neptune, plus the indications of some comets were good reasons for putting some work into the problem. Maybe it was possible to repeat the performance of Leverrier and to calculate "Planet X," also tentatively called the "Trans-Neptune" before it was discovered. Around 1900 one Prof. George Forbes had already predicted a Planet X, larger even than Jupiter in size, at a distance of about 100 astronomical units, requiring 1000 years for a complete revolution. Others were slightly less grandiloquent in their expectations; the German Theodor Grigull predicted a planet at about 50 A. U., expecting it to match Uranus or Neptune in size. And Percival Lowell worked out an orbit somewhere between the actual orbit of Neptune and the hypothetical orbit of Grigull.

Then, in 1930, came the news that the "Trans-Neptune" had actually been found. Percival Lowell had died in the meantime, but the discovery was made from his own observatory by Clyde Tombaugh. The actual discovery took place in January 1930, the announcement was postponed until March 13. That date was not only the date of the discovery of Uranus, it also happened to be Lowell's birthday. But contrary to all reasonable expectations Pluto was not a large planet. Instead of having a diameter of some 30,000 miles (Neptune's diameter is 31,000 miles, Uranus' 32,000 miles) it was hardly as large as Eearth. The diameter seemed to be around 7,500 miles, the mass of the new planet Pluto also a little less than that of Earth.

Some astronomers said at once that Pluto might not be "Planet X." It was a planet beyond Neptune, no doubt. But was it the one they had been looking for? When Pluto's orbit became known the doubts increased. To begin with Pluto had a highly elliptical orbit. At a maximum distance from the sun—professionally known as aphelion—it was somewhat farther away than the planet Precival Lowell had calculated. At minimum distance from the sun — perihelion—it was even inside the orbit of Neptune. And Pluto's orbit was not only highly eccentric (elongated), it also was strongly inclined. Of course we on earth take the orbit of Earth itself as the standard. The plane of the Earth's orbit is called ecliptic and the planes of the other planet's orbits are determined with reference to the ecliptic. The differ-

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ences, except for Mercury, are always very small. As regards the outer planets, the orbit of Uranus is practically in the same plane as that of Earth. The orbit of Neptune differs very slightly in inclination from that of Uranus. It also happens to be an almost perfect circle. But the orbit of Pluto showed an inclination of 17 degrees of arc. In fact, if Tombaugh had not looked for Pluto in 1930 he might never have found it. At that time the planet was passing approximately through the plane of the ecliptic which was the suspected area. Thirty years earlier the planet would have been far "below" and thirty years later far "above" the area searched. It was a pure accident that the search took place at the time it did.

Both Pluto's small size and the peculiarities of its orbit spoke against it as being the planet astronomers had been hunting. It did not seem probable that a planet of that size could cause the disturbances which had initiated the search. But since nobody could be quite sure about its true size there was room for argument, no telescope was powerful enough to show Pluto as a disk and to make a direct measurement of its apparent diameter possible. Once the apparent diameter was known one could easily calculate the true diameter. But the apparent diameter could not be measured.

It could not be measured, that is prior to the 200-inch telescope. Using the 200-inch, Dr. Gerard P. Kuiper could measure it in May, 1950. And he found that Pluto's diameter is only 3600 miles, a little more than half of that of our own planet. With that size Pluto can account for only about 10 per cent of the disturbances of the orbits of Uranus and Pluto. We can be quite sure now that those astronomers who did not think that Pluto was Planet X were right. Planet X is still unknown. But nobody can say, right now, where it is apt to be. Because Pluto indicates that at some time the balance of the solar system was badly shaken out there. Neptune is much closer than was expected. Pluto has an un-planet-like orbit. Recently somebody pointed out that Pluto's orbit is displaced "up and down" to about the same extent as Neptune's orbit seems to be displaced "inward." And Pluto's size is such that it might well have been a moon of Neptune at some time, because Neptune's large moon Triton measures some 3000 miles in diameter.

Unfortunately nobody can figure out an event which could do what seems to have taken place. That unknown event would have had to tear one of Neptune's moons (namely Pluto) away and disturb its orbit without changing its distance from the sun much. It would have had to push Neptune a billion miles inward but without otherwise disturbing its fine near-circular orbit. It would have disturbed Triton's orbit in a certain way, but without tearing it from its planet. A passing star would have

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enough power to do all those things, but not in the manner in which we see them now.

But whatever that unknown event was it probably also ruined the orbit of Planet X. We have every reason to believe that it is there. But since its orbit was probably twisted in an unknown manner it will take a long time until it can be deduced from the irregularities of Uranus, Neptune and, possibly Pluto. Systematic search is not likely to find it for another fifty years. But it may be accidentally discovered next week.

THE END

WHAT'S GOING ON HERE? WHERE? ON THE COVER!

(If you can answer that one, you'll be in the EASY MONEY— as easy as this: YOU use your imagination, WE pay the money!)

It's rather easy to explain: we had this cover painted by artist H. W. McCauley, and decided to run it this month. Then to our utter horror, we found we'd forgotten to have a story written to fit it! At last the thing we'd risked for many years had come about. And are we embarrassed? Heck no!

So, having a hole to fill on this page, we dug out a fifty-dollar bill. Naturally we couldn't paste it in this space, as fifty-dollar bills may not be defaced (so says the government) and glue would stain it. So, in order to get it to you, we are merely asking you to use your imagination in telling us what the front cover might be about, and the best explanation will get the fifty bucks by air-mail. Fair enough?

But remember, we've only got one fifty-dollar bill, so your explanation had better be worth writing down. You don't have to write a complete story, or even a complete synopsis of one. Just tell us who the girl is, who the little men are, what they are pointing at, and what's she gunning for? She's mad at something, but what?

You answer best, we pay!

OTHER WORLDS' "stumped" editors.
1144 Ashland, Evanston, Ill.

P. S. If you can answer in fifty words, we could brag forever after about how we pay "up to a dollar a word", couldn't we?

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JOURNEY TO NOWHERE

By Richard S. Shaver

Her voice came out of Space with seductive beauty — but it became a shriek of horror when two spaceships sailed to . . . nowhere!

JINKS did not know she was a monster. When she was first born, she did not seem very different from any of the other monstrous growths of quivering protoplasm about her. The others began to take note of her presence, however, after she learned to move about, for she belonged to a race of beings whose members never did much about motion, though they were able to pull loose at times.

These beings reproduced by the simplest of all means, that of budding. Jinks was revolutionary in that, too. She budded, all right, but her buds were not single and at the rate of one every four years; they came off her in scores, and each was quite as prodigiously active as herself! Soon Jinks' descendants numbered in the hundreds, and every one of them answered Jinks' thinking as the servant answers the master.

Jinks grew, became adult, and began to spend a great deal of her time out in the open, looking up at the mysterious stars. As she grew still older, and those stationary members of her race who remembered her unusual beginnings died off and were replaced by their own buds, Jinks became a law unto herself. She took up the already ancient science of wave communication, and step by step constructed the most tremendous aggregations of apparatus ever known to her race. Few of them had ever moved about enough to ever accomplish much with all their ancient knowledge. This moving about, this building and swift activity, this turmoil of decision without endless meditation—was frowned upon severely by the huddled groups of unmoving ancestors. But Jinks and her precious mob of sons and daughters only laughed. They had already learned to accept the original society of unmoving thinkers as just part of the landscape: handy to talk to and consult, handy to suck dry of their ancient, long-accumulated wisdom—but of little account in any practical matter that required labor and effort.

Jinks' descendants grew, all answering Jinks' constant mental orders as the hand the arm, and the work with the "radio" waves went on, it

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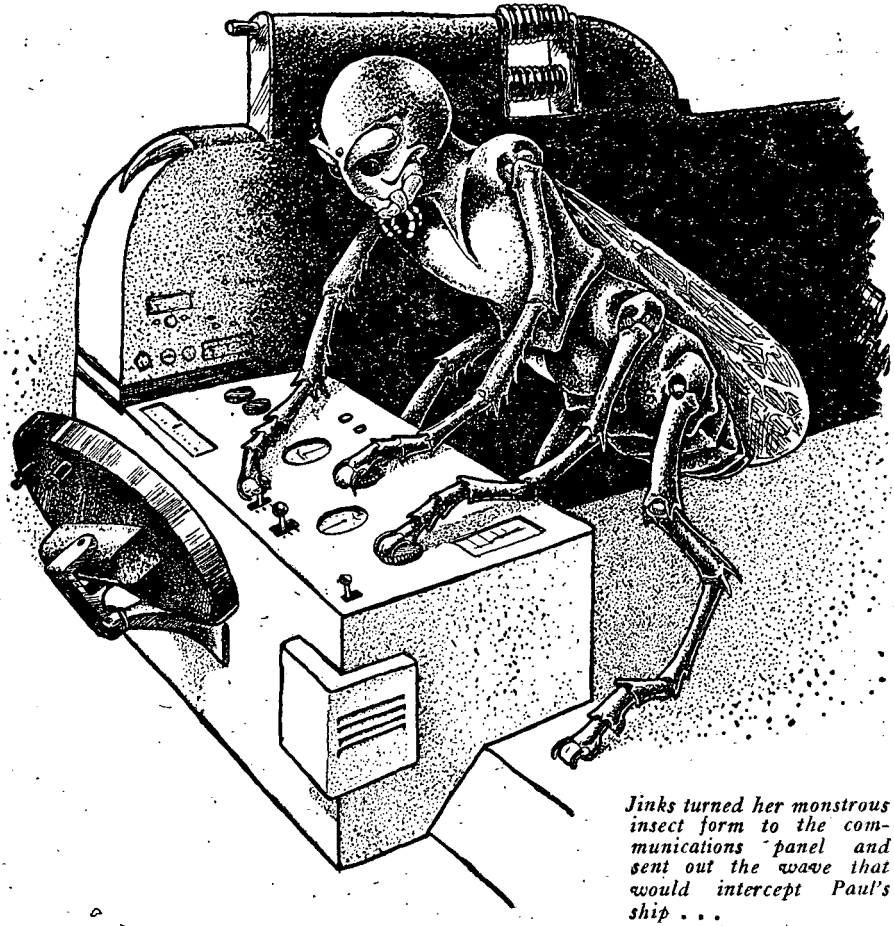

Jinks turned her monstrous insect form to the communications panel and sent out the wave that would intercept Paul's ship . . .

was the absorbing goal of all their lives. In the end they had their reward. Jinks' vast assemblies of weird and revolutionary apparatus brought in signals from the distant stars!

The work went on then at a furious pace. They must establish contact, must make the distant sender hear their transmitter!

PAUL Verne was thunderstruck when his short-wave set began to give off audible thought waves! They came from but one point of the compass; the antenna setting was very sensitive. But the content of the messages gave him little time to think about direction or its significance, in the beginning. He was too

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busy taking down the mysterious thought signals in shorthand.

The messages were extremely packed, the distant sender seemed one whose mind went at a super-rapid clip—it was very difficult, at first. But the days went by, the notes piled up, and Paul began to realize that the distant signals were not possibly from Earth.

Not from Earth . . . ? Paul could not accept the stars as sources for a long time. He became very well acquainted with Jinks, that is with Jinks' husky voice, sensuous and loving and full of burning ambition, full of a sweet irresistible compulsion to work. It filled Paul with similar ambitions for the conquest of . . . the stars! and more besides. Plans were gone over between the two of them for week after week of intermittent discussion.

Then tragedy struck at Paul. Just as he felt almost ready to call in the engineers, the officials, the pundits and the experts to certify his star contact as genuine, Paul was stricken with a near-fatal illness. The illness was of such a nature as to throw doubt upon the validity of any of his work. For the doctors at the hospital diagnosed his trouble as brain tumor.

* * *

JUDY Petersen was one of those women who arouse the sex urge. Deplore it as you will, the urge is paramount, superseding all other drives in the human. The sex urge often drives a man toward what can never be. Toward what the man *knows* can never be, driving him against the dictates of his own logic and will. To Paul, to try to escape the dominance of this urge toward Judy was unthinkable—*before Jinks.*

Judy Petersen was one of those females who trigger off Mother Nature's most potent dynamite in all directions; who walk through a host of men with the ease and disregard of a ballet dancer traversing a mine field whose pattern she alone knows. And with Judy that was the case. She knew the pattern. Judy loved one certain man, which gave her an impervious armor.

After the doctors told her the news, Judy never expected Paul Verne to live. A brain tumor is not always fatal, but this one . . .

The position was all wrong for a successful operation. The hospital staff had located the tumor with the new radioactive carbon tracer method, and after the Geiger counter had explained that Paul would have to die, they all stood around and patiently waited for the event of his demise.

Paul Verne refused to drop dead on schedule. The doctors began to come into his room to look at him reproachfully, but this did not hasten his demise. In fact, he began to put on weight from lying in bed.

Paul knew what he was expected to do, though no one told him directly. For Paul Verne was a young

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nan gifted with a powerful set of leductive dendrons, neurons and ther micro-characters making up his loomed brain. He had felt that pain it the base of his skull too long, too steadily, not to know very well there was a serious cause for it. But Paul wasn't very sick, and he would not consent to a last-ditch, long-shot operation. He felt it was too much like taking his last days away from him to prove the medical specialists right in their prognosis.

Judy came to see him every day. As he began to feel better, he started to insist he was not sick. He wanted to go home! Which horrified the doctors, worried Judy no end, and gave the nurses cat-fits. The doctors shook their dignified pates, looked at him with wondering eyes, and decided to run a new series of tests. To which new tests Paul submitted grudgingly, with eyes full of scorn and open doubt of their ability to treat a sick tom-cat.

To them it wasn't possible the man could walk! Let alone get up and go home under his own power. By all the rules he should have been in his grave. Judy's conversations with her love were very trying.

"Paul dearest, the doctors know best! Now you just be patient and obey orders; we'll get you out of here the very first possible second!"

Paul would take in the way Judy filled out her sweater, the joy she unloaded with what in anyone else would be called a smile, and would say:

"Judy, I am not sick! These addle-pated croakers have made a mistake. Now you get it fixed up for me to go home! I've had enough hospital to last me the rest of my life!"

The sad truth in his words "the rest of my life" would move Judy from smiling encouragement to drenching tears—for Judy had not told Paul he had but a short time to live. Trying very hard not to let Paul see the tears, Judy would rush out of the room on an imaginary errand, dry her eyes carefully, make up her soft cheeks and rush back with the joyful smile just as potent as only Judy could make it. Then they would do it all over again.

Judy was fast becoming an expert if heart-broken actress. But the lovely curves of her body and the long, delectable lines of her legs began to suffer as Judy lost weight. She was grieving herself sick over poor Paul dying by inches and not even being allowed to know it.

Finally Paul got up, shoved a doctor in the face, pushed a horrified nurse out of the room, put on his clothes and stalked out of the hospital.

No one argued over-much with the exit, as Paul Verne weighed a good hearty two-ten and had gained more, lying in bed.

When Judy caught up with him, at Paul's home, she managed to make him promise to take in another round of medical experts to make sure he was able to be up

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and around.

When he did so, mysteriously all the indications of oncoming death from malignant tumor which the hospital staff had so carefully traced with the very latest methods had vanished. Paul was pronounced sound.

The concentrations of radioactive carbon they had watched build up around that certain unapproachable and inoperable area of the brain at the top of the spinal column were no longer present. Nor did the new doses of tracer follow the same course laid out by the previous tests.

The most noticeable and happy outcome of all this was that Judy Petersen regained her former state of delectable prominence in the right places, and everybody loved the miracle that had given her back her boy friend right out of death's clutches. The interference of the tumor with the course of Paul's communications with the stars remained a complete secret between Paul and Jinks.

AFTER his recovery, Paul went back to his first love, when he had time off from squiring Judy. Paul was a structural steel engineer during his working hours. During his spare time he was a radio enthusiast. Which is a superfluity of abilities and trainings to find in one man, but Paul was not an average man.

Judy herself was quite a student, and spent a lot of her evenings at night school, or under the lamp in her own home with a large volume of biology or a small book of advanced mathematics. Which suited Paul perfectly as it gave him time to tear down the ever-growing mass of amateur apparatus and reassemble it along new lines. These new lines had come to him during his enforced period of inactivity in a hospital bed.

Since his return to the living, Judy always knew where to find her man when she wanted him. She found him there at midnight the night she learned about her rival.

Paul looked up at Judy from the maze of wiring he was soldering. When Judy was around hardly anyone looked at anything else. Paul knew she had hypnotic curves, but just now he was not being hynotized.

"Be with you in a minute, beautiful. Gotta finish this thing tonight. I want to show you something a lot more important than a pain in my neck."

Judy Petersen was still worried about her man. She knew there must be something wrong with his head, but she wasn't sure just what to worry about. Now Paul proceeded to give her plenty to worry about. "You see, my girl, I never told you. I have kept it a profound secret! I, in this little radio shack of mine, have managed to make man's first contact with the stars!"

Judy was scientifically educated about radio waves. That he should think a bunch of junk like this could send and receive signals from

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the stars was just too impossible! Judy put both hands to her face and got ready to burst into tears— here was her man saved out of the jaws of death and talking crazy! Then she pulled herself together.

"Paul, you *mustn't* believe such things! Radio waves won't traverse the infinite distances of space!"

Paul switched on the motor generator, tuned up a set of self-built coils, swung a big loop aerial in a short arc. From the loudspeaker came a voice of husky, sensual character; a vital, fascinating, compelling voice which made Judy burn up with sudden jealousy. The voice was more than a voice, in some strange way conveying directly to the brain the meaning of the words, which were thus strange in sound but quite plain in meaning.

"Calling Paul Verne. Signals again received and am calling. Please acknowledge. Where have you been? This contact must not be broken again! A world is at stake! Please acknowledge."

Judy sniffed, audibly. "You're just making a fool of me. That mumbo-jumbo has nothing whatever to do with the stars, and you know it. I don't like this attempt to make a fool out of me, Paul! I am about to commit angered mayhem and assault!"

PAUL was not paying any attention to a woman's whims. With a rapidity that gave the impression of a madman trying to build a broadcast station in two minutes flat, he was throwing his various units of apparatus about, tossing coils and tubes and condensers together in a bread-board set-up, slapping bus-bar across connections, and in ten minutes and some seconds by the clock was speaking anxiously back to the unknown.

If Judy could have understood his strange-sounding words, she would have heard: "Signals received. Have been in hospital. Please proceed with our interupted course of instructions."

Paul was not thinking about Judy's reactions to his furious activity, nor about convincing her of the reality of his contact with the far-off worlds of space. But as the meaning began to make itself understood in her mind in spite of the strangeness of the sounds of the words, she became convinced that something utterly beyond reason or ordinary concepts of possibility was indeed going on in front of her eyes. That sultry, she-male voice intoned endlessly through Paul's loudspeaker: "I have been put to extreme fatigue in keeping this fix upon your planet. Please do not break contact again! You must understand, dear friend, what I have for you and what I expect in return."

"Who *is* that lascivous character?" asked Judy, with all the antagonism of a woman meeting an avowed opponent in the greatest game of all. That "dear friend" meant many conversations in the past, and the fact that Paul had not mentioned it

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to her meant only one thing—Paul was interested!

"That," answered Paul with ecstasy in his voice and a glaze on his eyes, "is the first authentic signal from another planet ever heard by anyone but myself on all Earth."

Grave doubts of Paul's sanity assailed Judy, giving her again that agony of mind which had been hers for so long. She tried to fight back. "Signals from another planet! Why, that stuff isn't farther away than New Jersey! I'm going home if you persist in this stupid joke!"

Paul was not paying proper attention to her, which in itself was unusual and painful. The voice went on enigmatically: "I will proceed with the detailed description of construction which we were engaged in recording at our last contact. Please correct me if there has been any detail missed in the lapsed time. Is your recorder set?"

Paul turned on the automatic recorder, inserted record wire, and the voice went on. Paul turned to Judy, for there was no need his listening; the endless technical descriptions of appartus had to be studied out painfully and at much slower speed in a playback. He wondered if he could ever get anyone to understand and to help.

"You see, dearest Judy, I have been in contact with this strange signal source for nearly a year. I have been accumulating these records. I have had an increasing pain in the back of my head ever since I made this contact, and I suspect there is some peculiar and irritating quality to the waves the source uses in sending which causes the pain the doctors were so sure was a malignant tumor. But I had not associated the two things until I saw that the doctors must be wrong in their diagnosis. It was then I deduced that the unusual wave-lengths used in this apparatus, the unique combinations of frequency modulations and the terrific strength of the sender's wave must be in some way responsible by setting up a destructive reverberation in the sensory centers of the brain. You see, Judy, I don't know too much about this thing. I am strictly an agent under instructions from this far-off source—and they are of an alien culture! This seemingly harmless assemblage of apparatus must create by accident a sonic force-focus. But I have to go on, no matter the harm it may do me. That signal is from another world."

Miss Petersen, who was not uninformed, remembered the rash of signals supposedly from Mars that had accompanied the last conjunction of that planet. She, like most others, was sure the recipients of the so-called Martian signals were self-deluded. But she had no doubt that Paul would recover his good sense when he uncovered the identity and location of the party who was making such a fool of him. She mentally assured herself that the recent sojourn in the hospital quite

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aturally meant there was nothing rganically wrong with Paul's brain, nd she was sure that he was recover- ıg. So she humored him.

Paul pulled her to the open win- ow. The directional antenna pointed ut that window. Paul picked up a lender rod from the table. He had sed that rod before. "Look along he rod, Judy!"

Judy squinted, sighting along the od. It pointed at a cluster of stars n the heavens.

"There is one star in that cluster, udy. Now if you turn around, you ill see by looking along the rod hat it points at the center of the ›ig loop aerial. No one but ourselves nows where that signal comes from ›r that there is a signal from the tars. You see, this apparatus, though ›f familiar parts, is built according ›o directions received when I first ıeard the signal over an experiment- ıl hook-up."

Judy didn't believe it. She hated to think of that sultry, commanding voice. She was glad it might be from another planet. After all, there wasn't much danger the woman could take Paul from her, if she was *that* far away. But the ecstasy on Paul's face when he heard that voice gave Judy the shivers. Paul didn't look like that when *she* talked to him!

MONTHS went by and Paul had completely proved that his contact with the stars was not only real, but from a being who ruled the people of a whole planet. Paul had brought in engineers, the engineers had brought their employers, and Paul had become the head of a group of people who listened to the broadcast of the Empress—she named Jinks—every evening. They had tentatively begun operations toward the construction of a space ship and Paul lived through the days in constant suspense, in an aura of exciting participation in the distant people's united effort to overcome the barrier of space.

A plan grew up, as the blueprints for the star ship were gone over. The future ship was discussed and checked with the radio-personality of Jinks, who enthusiastically related the much more advanced stages of her own people's attempt to build a space ship. In what seemed an incredibly short space of time she told of the first successful flight of their star ship. So it was decided to build the Earth ship precisely like Jinks' successful ship except for improvements according to Earth techniques.

More months went by, and still the contact with Jinks remained the central point around which Paul and Judy and a group of engineers and financiers revolved, in an increasing certainty that man would reach space soon. The whole world knew of Paul's Empress Jinks and accepted her.

One singular fact no one could explain. Jinks could be reached only through Paul Verne! Only Paul was accepted by the singular Empress as a person worthy of her time and

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effort—as a trustworthy receiver of the immense values of her people's achievements. Every effort to tune in Jinks by other parties failed — and it was only in Paul's presence that the strange and distant waves came through and were recorded. But, strangely enough, almost every attempt in his presence was successful.

Judy lived through the exciting days that lengthened into months in a glow of reflected glory. As the traffic of visitors and dignitaries revolved around Paul, Judy became a kind of lovely door tender and secretary. But all the time she became more jealous.

The ship was finished at last, and the alien engines which drew power from the free energies of space itself demonstrated their adequacy in a series of short flights beyond the Moon. Then came the first voyage to Mars and the return . . . with the news that Mars was in truth both uninhabitable and uninhabited.

Then came Jinks' sensational proposal for a rendezvous of the two ships in space—one containing Empress Jink and entourage, and the other from Earth headed by the famous Paul Verne.

There were endless discussions about the value of such a meeting, and some even pointed out that it might be a trap by the Empress — who now knew as much about their world as they did themselves. It could be possible that she planned to destroy their one space vessel and then sail on to conquer Eart and enslave all Earth men. But Pau scoffed the warning out of discus sion with a single sentence.

"This Empress is not predatory She is purely benevolent, else wh has she spent such endless hour and given us so much valuable dat that could be used against her if w were so minded?"

The point in space was decide upon, the ship was readied, Pau kissed Judy goodbye. Tears were shed by everyone—and Judy's jealousy of the she-being Jinks nearly overwhelmed her, but the great adventure must go on and she must remain behind to contemplate woman's lot in a man's world, as usual.

* * *

THE space ship that Jinks had caused to be built was like nothing ever seen by man. It was of a peculiar eight-sided design, and it could have been navigated by a giant snail, as the controls were centralized in three huge levers, each of which could be manipulated by pressure— Jinks had small claws that could handle small tools, but she did not know if the distant race with whom she had managed to establish contacts were not like the motionless race of slugs on her own planet. Jinks always thought of them as the old-timers, the creatures who had preceded her advent. So she built a ship that even they could navigate.

Jinks had many reasons for her effort toward reaching space. Her

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world was small, her own progeny, now in their fifth generation, had almost filled all available space with their unsleeping activities. And Jinks herself was stiill growing. Jinks was ambitious for her children. That ambition lay behind her insistence upon contact only with Paul Verne, for Jinks knew that Paul was completely under her influence, and no whisper of her real intent must get through to others of Paul's race. With Paul she could keep up the pretense of benevolence—with others, of a more suspicious nature, she was not so sure. Jinks did not conceive of herself as a monster about to annihilate a people and take over a planet; she saw herself as a mother providing food and space for her children—the instinctive and natural thing to do. For Jinks was the first of her kind, and made her own rules as she went along, having abandoned all the precepts and teachings of her forebears since they could not possibly apply in her case. Jinks was driven by the mother instinct, and brooded savagely and at length upon their future. Her forebears had children only in numbers that replaced their kind—Jinks ever-growing body threw off buds in ever increasing quantities as she reached full maturity.

Jinks' plans for Paul Verne and his simple-minded fellow aliens matured through the months of radio-contact as the projected rendezvous became the accepted plan—became perfectly clear and inevitably exact in Jinks' tremendous mind.

By this time, with the total powers of her own progeny—numbering in the millions—directed toward the construction of ships of war, Jinks became exultantly certain of the complete success of her plan. They would approach her with the only ship able to travel space; she would capture them, learn the complete details of their world and how best to conquer them, then . . . . down from their skies would sweep Jinks' destroying fleet. Jinks figured it would be over in a matter of hours at the most. Then there would be plenty of time to plan the next step in making space the sole property of her own children. Room enough, food enough, and time enough!

Came the appointed day, and Jinks' ship lifted into the skies, and after her came her endless brood, like a swarm of bees about the queen at swarming time. Behind her Jinks heard the vast sigh of relief that went up from the old-timers who realized that at last they were free of the everlasting noise and bustle and pushing, the terrible fecundity of the strange off-spring of their ancient race. Jinks laughed to hear them, and dropped a chemical bomb which flared into incandescence behind her, wiped out some thousands of the statuesque mother race as a farewell.

Erasing the past from her mighty mind, Jinks turned her monstrous insect form to the communications panel, sent out the wave which

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would intermittently intercept the flight of Paul Verne and his group of dupes. Still chuckling, she smoothed her thought into the sexy, husky voice that Paul admired so very much.

"Calling World Expedition No. 1, please acknowledge . . . "

* * *

THE space ship built according to Paul Verne's directions was like nothing on or under the Earth. It was of peculiar eight-sided design, and it could have been navigated by a giant slug . . .

The controls were centralized in three gigantic levers, the walks and stairs were all slopes and ramps, a legless creature could have rolled about it, oozed up and down it, without difficulty. But the human engineers thought it better to stick to the communicated design exactly, to preserve the identical weight and balance and placement of engines. They had an enormous respect for Empress Jinks' engineering ability, and feared to change anything that might conceivably betray their ignorance by causing a fault in its performance.

Paul supervised the construction, making sure that specifications in vital details were adhered to precisely, and became immensely interested in the daily process of translation of the records he had taken into steel and plastic and magnesium. From voice to metal, it was an experience that never lost its wonder and awe of the abilities of the distant Empress Jinks.

As the ship took form, and its complete variance from the human concept of what a ship should look like became apparent, Paul's interest grew.

When the ship finally lifted into the air on the supreme final test—the meeting in space with Jinks own expedition—Paul almost failed to show his sorrow of parting with Judy. Judy watched the great ship out of sight with fresh tears in her eyes. He had been so absorbed that not once had his eyes lost the absent, excited intentness upon everything but herself. But she forgave him, and went home to await his return.

The voyage was uneventful. Jinks' voice came in on the radio at three hour intervals, the space traversed on the given route was the expected 85,000 miles per second, and the days went by in a glow of speculation about the nature and appearance of the people whose Empress they were about to meet.

Then came the approach to the spot on the space chart given as the rendezvous. There came Jinks' somewhat puzzled voice, no longer husky and sensual and hypnotic, but now tense and somewhat doubtful.

"Calling Earth Ship No. 1! Come in! We have appoximated position agreed upon and should be picking up your motors in our detectors. Can you see us?"

Paul's answer: "No sign of Jinks'

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Ship No. 1. We will have to take up a circular course. Please make every attempt to get a fix on our signals. We should reach you soon; our directional signals reach you and you answer exactly as before. I suspect we have not reached radar range of your ship. We will circle and you continue as before . . . "

The seach for the needle in the haystack of space went on and on. The change in signal strength was undetectable as it had been from the first which was a mystery the engineers had only shaken their heads about. Some thirty hours later, Jinks' ship and the Earth ship were still in perfect radio contact, still searching the area for each other with every device at their command —and were completely unable to get any idea of the other's direction or distance! Checking of star charts and comparison by radio gave them no point of difference on which to base a deduction as to the other's whereabouts. To find each other became an enigma before which Paul threw up his hands and went off for a long neglected night's rest.

WHEN he awoke, the radio engineer sat beside his bed with a little short wave radio set in his hand. On his face was a peculiar expression. On Paul's neck was fastened a tiny coil of copper wire by means of adhesive tape. Paul sat up. startled to wakefulness by the man's enigmatic eyes, the apparatus in his lap, the feel of the wires on the back of his head.

"Take it easy, Paul, there's nothing to get excited about, just doing a little checking of my own. I've kept silent so long in this thing I just had to make sure that my suspicions were correct . . . . "

* * *

BACK home, Judy received Paul with all the glad relief of an angel welcoming a soul from the nether regions. "Oh, I never waited so long a time for anything as to see your face again! Oh Paul!"

After supper, Paul leaned back and prepared to regale Judy with the great adventure. And his tale ended with the words:

"So you see, Judy, it was all in my head after all! Jinks is a micro being, and her universe is a cell in my brain. The doctors think she is really a mutated brain micron, the little nucleus creature which in unison with other brain cell microns, does all our thinking.

"But Jinks mutated, decided she was an individual and not a slave to the macro mind, and all our efforts to rendevouz with her ship were the purest kind of foolishness. We should have discovered it long ago . . . also her predatory purpose which she carelessly revealed."

Of course Judy had to say: "Just as I suspected! I never trusted that woman, someway . . .

As for Jinks, they never told her the truth and she sailed on, and on, and on . . .

THE END

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NO APPROACH

By David Gordon

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Ever been on a train when you pass a crossing? Funny how that warning bell suddenly drops in pitch as you zip by.

Four minutes after the Luna XXI settled gently to rest on the spacefield at Theophilus, a blond young man was presenting his papers to the Government Police guard at the tubeway station.

The guard slid them under the scanner. Somewhere far below them, an electronic brain compared them with their duplicates and decided that the gentleman in question really was James L. Simons, of General Alloys, Inc., especially since his prints matched beautifully.

"All right, Mr. Simons." The guard shoved back the papers.

"Thanks. Say, which tube do I take to Peak City?"

"Either three or four. Three's the express."

"Thanks again."

The blond young man turned and walked toward Tubeway Three, breathing a little better.

"That," he thought, *"is probably the first time that brain has ever made a wrong identification.*

Six minutes after that, he was on the train; the magnetic field coils slammed it along at better than sixty miles an hour. In three more minutes, he was in Peak City, located beneath the crust of the "high" end of the central peak of the lunar crater Theophilus.

If you approached a sun, the whole ship would become—like an atom bomb!

The girl was waiting for him in the station. She didn't see him immediately, and he paused for a moment to look. Light brown hair, smooth warmly-tanned skin and eyes that were — green? No, blue. She was looking straight at him, smiling.

He smiled back, and they walked toward each other.

"Jim! Jim, darling!" She threw her arms around him and held him for a moment, then put her face up to be kissed.

It was not what he would have called an enjoyable kiss; mobile, realistic, and pliable though they are, a plexiskin mask simply does not have any sensory nerves.

Afterward, he realized that she hadn't gotten anything out of the kiss either. He thought: "I wonder what she *really* looks like under that mask?"

Her voice hissed whisperingly in his ear as he held her tight to him: "Alas, alack, and aday —"

"—we'll all be dead someday," he finished in the same tone. It was a poor couplet, and, he thought, a rather morbid one; but it served its purpose.

The girl led him out of the station, and into a cab, chattering in a

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wifely manner all the time. They talked pleasantly all the way to the apartment district — about nothing of importance.

"Apartment 3312, Corridor 62," was the address she had given the cab. Peak City was not exactly a city in the Earthly sense of the word; it was a series of corridors and compartments hacked and blasted out of the Lunar bedrock.

They stepped out of the cab and went through a doorway into the narrower pedestrian corridor. The girl unlocked a door numbered 3312; a door exactly similar to hundreds of other doors stretching up and down both ways along the well-lit corridors. She flung it open with a grandiose gesture and said: "Well, darling, this is home!"

He walked on in and looked around, as he supposed he was expected to do. He heard the door click shut, and turned back to the girl.

She was pointing a large and very nasty-looking gun straight at his midsection.

"BEFORE you say anything, let me tell you that I will not hesitate to shoot if the answers to the questions I am about to ask are either slow in coming or in any way incorrect."

Her voice was still calm, with no trace of hardness in it.

"I understand." For some reason, his voice didn't sound quite as calm.

"First: your real name."

"Rupert Lee Corby. I —"

"Don't volunteer any information; just answer. How were you contacted? Details, please."

All right, he thought, *if you want details, you'll get them.*

"I was arrested four weeks and three days ago by the Government Police — three agents, named Atkins, Baker, and Colvin — who picked me up at approximately six-thirty in the evening just as I was leaving my laboratory. They took me to Police Headquarters on Two Hundred and Sixty-Ninth Street, where I was given an exhaustive robotic lie detector test. The questions were —"

"Never mind what the questions were, get on with it."

"After they were completely satisfied as to my loyalty and honesty, they gave me my instructions."

"And these were?"

"To report here, on this date and do as I have done. I was shown three photographs of your appearance in your present disguise so that I would be able to recognize you, and I was given the rhyme couplet."

The gun still hadn't moved one iota. "Do you know why you are here?"

"No. I was told that it was highly secret and confidential work. Nothing more."

"All right. Now, take off the mask."

He did so, peeling it up from his throat and off his forehead.

And still the gun did not move.

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Corby frowned. "Aren't you satisfied?"

"Not quite. All of this information could have been removed from the real Dr. Corby's mind and hypnotically implanted in yours. One more question."

In quick succession, she fired a string of mathematical symbols at him. Unhesitatingly, Corby fired another set back at her.

"Dr. Corby," she said, dropping the gun to her side, "there is only one man in the Solar System who could have answered that question. I am very gad to meet you."

Corby smiled. "And there is only one woman who could have asked it. I am very glad to meet *you*, Dr. Janice Luise Forbes."

She frowned slightly. "You accept that in spite of —"

"In spite of the fact that Dr. Forbes is supposed to have died twelve years ago? Yes. If another woman had, in that time achieved your mathematical brilliance, I would have known about it. Q.E.D.: You are Janice Forbes."

"I see. Well, I'm afraid I'll have to admit it."

She was removing her own face mask now, and Corby watched, interestedly.

It wasn't actually much different from her own face. A little extra thickness here and there, and her own jaw line was more pronounced, firmer. And yet Corby knew he would never have recognized her from the pictures the Police had shown him.

She was still young and — well, not beautiful, but very attractive. As well as he could recall, she was about eight years younger than he — that would make her sixty-one or two.

"What next?" Corby asked after she had removed the now-shapeless mass of plastic. "Can you tell me what this is all about?"

"Better than that, I'll show you." Janice stepped over to the phone and flipped the switch. The screen didn't light, nor could he hear the faint hum that showed the speaker was operating. Nevertheless, she leaned over and said softly: "Ad astra per aspirin." Then, she released the switch.

Corby looked at her solemnly. "Aren't you sort of misquoting your Latin?"

"You'd be surprised how true it is," she answered. "Now let's go."

For the barest fraction of a second, Corby felt startled. A section of the wall had slipped aside to reveal what appeared to be a darkened closet. Then he realized it was an elevator.

They went in, and the elevator began to drop at what Corby considered a sickening rate of speed. It stopped at what appeared to be a tubeway station except that there wasn't a soul in sight. A single empty car waited for them.

Corby followed Janice through the door, and they braced themselves

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against the backs of the seats. The car began to move, slowly at first, then more rapidly. The lights in the car went out, and they were left in absolute blackness.

"You see," Janice explained through the darkness, "no one knows exactly where on the Moon Project Aspirin is — except for a few top government officials. This car, and a few others like it are the only ways to get there. In a few minutes, we'll be past the field of the gravity generators under Theophilus Peak, so watch your stomach."

Even though he was prepared for it, the shock came so suddenly that Corby was almost sick. In a spasm of quick, jerking nausea, Corby's weight dropped to thirty pounds.

"No wonder," he said, after swallowing, "they use these fields. Imagine growing up under this gravity."

"Right. There are a million people living in Peak City, a couple of hundred thousand of them children. Imagine that many monstrosities!"

They were silent for a moment, then Corby said: "Well, come on, what is it? What is all this hush-hush about?"

Janice Forbes seemed to be choosing her words carefully.

"We are building one of the greatest spaceships ever dreamed of by man — an interstellar vessel. At top speed, it will reach a velocity nearly ten thousand times that of light."

Corby felt, mentally, the same shock that the gravity release had given him physically; as before he forced it down, made his voice calm.

"I see. And what is my part in all this?"

"Until we get there, this is the last answer I'll give you: You are here to investigate a hunch."

Corby kept his mouth shut. He knew only too well that this woman would no more answer another question than the nearest wall. But, by God, he could speculate!

An interstellar ship! It hardly sounded possible. For better than seven centuries, now, man had owned the Solar System, lock, stock, and barrel. He had found no resistance, nothing to fight his control. Life had, in a few instances, existed in lower forms — algae, bacteria, and a few others — but only Earth had spawned animal life; only Earth had bred an intelligent species.

And now the stars. Maybe somewhere, somehow, out there, they would find other intelligences. For here, somewhere beneath the gray, hard rock of Earth's moon, man was at last building a ship that could reach across those awful distances to other suns, other planets.

How long had they been building it? Who had evolved the drive that so violently violated known physics? And all this security, this secrecy; all the imprisonment and suffering and headaches its builders must have suffered!

Suddenly Corby laughed aloud.

"What's so funny?" Janice Forbes asked.

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"Headaches! Ad astra per aspirin! To the stars through aspirin!' I think I'm going to like this crowd!"

Her laughter joined his as the car hissed on through the blackness.

EIGHT guards met them at the end of the long tubeway, guns levelled. Evidently no one trusted anyone around here.

More identification procedure and more questions before they were finally released to go to the construction site.

"Why all the secrecy?" Corby asked as they walked down another of the seemingly endless corridors. "What in the devil could it possibly hurt to release this stuff?"

She looked at him oddly. "Ever hear of Solar Atomics?"

"Sure. So?"

"So they own, *sub rosa,* every atomic corporation in the System. The Government can't prove it, of course, but they *know* it. How would they react if they knew that within a few years other corporations would be opening up far out there, in places they couldn't possibly control? The same goes for half a dozen other interests and lobbies."

"Mmmh. I see. The same thing that happened on Earth when the first rocket was proposed. A lot of people yelled 'Expense! Higher taxes! Wasted money!"

"Right. Well, here we are."

She slid open the door — and he saw it.

The cavern was gigantic, reaching up and up until even the brilliant lights showed nothing but a bright, hazy glare. Far across the room, figures could be seen moving about, but what they were doing Corby couldn't see, nor, at that moment, did he care. He was looking at The Monster.

Dead black and featureless it loomed far above him, higher than he could see up into the foggy light and even then it looked as though there were more and yet more of it.

Janice's voice was low beside him, as though even she, after twelve years, was awed by its immensity.

"One mile high. A quarter of a mile in its greatest diameter. Over half of it is filled with the drive mechanism and the auxiliaries. That's why we don't use gravity fields here; normal Earth pull would crush it under the weight. Once it takes off it will never land again; it's not built for it. It carries smaller auxiliary ships for landing purposes, while the monster remains in a free fall orbit aound the planet.

"Crew?" he asked, still staring up.

"One man could take it anywhere in the Galaxy."

That didn't startle Corby. He felt that nothing could anymore.

"When will she be finished?"

"She's finished now."

Her voice was still low, and for a moment her words didn't penetrate. Then he turned.

"Then what in hell am I here for?" If they expect me to test pilot the thing, they're nuts!"

She laughed. "No, of course not!

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I told you; you're here to investigate a hunch. Come on, we'll go see some people."

Wordlessly, he followed her around the wall of the great construction room until they came to another door. Corby followed her in.

Four men were seated around the big table in the center of the room, evidently discussing the papers that lay scattered before them. They all turned to look at Corby as he and Janice Forbes entered the room.

"Gentlemen," said the girl, "this is Dr. Rupert Corby. Corby, reading from left to right, we have Lionel Worth, our Chief Engineer; James Hammermill, Project Co-ordinator; Jerry Winfield, Design Engineer and test pilot; and his brother Robert, our troubleshooter."

HELLO'S, glad-to-meet-you's, and general handshaking all around. Worth and the two Winfields were younger men, none over eighty, but Co-ordinator Hammermill was an elderly man, probably creeping up on the two-hundred mark.

Hammermill smiled at him. "Well, Dr. Corby, what do you think of Project Aspirin?"

"Frankly, gentlemen, I'm a little befuddled."

Hammermill, Worth, and Jerry Winfield all swung their eyes toward Bob Winfield, who was holding out one hand, palm upward, looking solemnly expectant.

"Oh, well," ionell Worth sighed, "maybe we'll learn not to bet with Bob, someday."

Each of the men handed Bob a ten-solar bill, which was folded carefully and placed in Bob's tunic pocket.

"I don't get it." Corby frowned confusedly.

Worth glared good-humoredly at Corby. "Will you please shut up, Dr. Corby? You're costing us money."

Another trio of tens passed into Bob Winfield's pocket.

Co-ordinator Hammermill looked at Bob. "Tell me, my boy, what do you do with all the money you get that way? Really, I'm interested."

"Simple, sir. I use it to feed a pet Plutonian monster named Ybxib, who feeds on nothing but Earth imported Scotch." He swung his gaze toward Corby. "You may speak now, sir. They won't lose any more money."

Corby felt very near the explosion point. "Will you please tell me what under the sun this is all about? I haven't been so ungodly fouled up since — I don't know when!"

Hammermill's lined face grew solemn. "What you just saw illustrates your whole problem, Dr. Corby. We call Robert Winfield our troubleshooter for the very simple reason that he is, to some extent, prescient. As you just saw, he was able to tell us the first two sentences you would utter after the introductions were over.

"Just how it is done, none of us knows. Subconscious calculation of factors involved might be one an-

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swer. A belief in fate might be another, except that we could have taken steps against your saying what you did, thereby destroying the effectiveness of Bob's prediction. In other words, if Bob can tell us what is coming, we can, if we so desire, prevent it.

"However, these predictions are not controllable. They come upon him suddenly, randomly. And they are not always complete. The farther in the future they are supposed to occur, the less complete they are. One more thing adds to the complexity of this gift: Bob never gets the same 'hunch' twice. That is, he can never add any more detail once the prediction has come, not even right up to the second before he has it. Do you follow me?"

"I think so," Corby answered. "If, for instance, his hunch told him that I was going to put my hand in my pocket, but not what I was going to take out, then he would never know what I was going to take out of it. Right?"

"Not until you actually took it out. Precisely."

"And so?"

Hammermill looked again at Bob Winfield. "Tell him, Bob."

Winfield leaned earnestly across the table. "Just this, sir: I have a hunch that something catastrophic is going to happen to the ship. I also know that it will not be due to any human agency, but due to a defect in our calculations. Other than that, I know nothing."

"So you see," Hammermill added, "your job, Dr. Corby, is to find that defect."

WITHIN four days, Corby realized what a really tremendous job he had on his hands. Thousands upon thousands of taped and typed calculations had to be gone over, bit by bit, equation by equation, section by section. Eighteen of the most complex calculators designed by modern cybernetics had to be kept busy. He and Janice Forbes had to work like the tireless "brains" themselves to co-ordinate the work, to check and re-check it.

The drive itself was simple; nothing but a souped-up version of an ordinary atomic motor. The real secret of that hulking black ship was the mass-time converter.

Einsteinian physics shows that as a body approaches the velocity of light, its mass approaches infinity, while its time rate approaches zero. The mass-time converter simply changed the added mass into time flow, thereby keeping the total constant, but permitting the ship to achieve any velocity without there being any difference between objective or Earth time, and subjective or ship time.

To say that the math was complicated would be one of those well-known masterpieces of understatement.

During the short periods while he had nothing much to do, that is, when the calculators were loaded with

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work and he was waiting for the answers, Corby spent his time attempting to clarify the situation into which he had been so cavalierly thrust.

He was confined, he found, to a rather limited section of the immense caverns that housed Project Aspirin. The mathematical chambers, the Section Cafeteria, and the two room apartment which had been assigned him were his absolute limit. There were Government Police, high-ranking men all, for every section, and no one was permitted to go from one section to the other without a pass from the Project Co-ordinator, not even the Police officers themselves.

He felt, in a way, that he had usurped Janice Forbe's position as head of Math Division, but she didn't seem to resent it in any way, and worked like the proverbial ant to get the job done. They moved in a whirl of figures, equations, and Greek letters, accompanied by the subtle whirrings of eighteen calculators and the whisperings of the thirty-six technicians required to run them.

Several times Corby noticed young Bob Winfield standing near the doorway, watching, his boyish face immobile, his eyes watching everything.

"He is one of the few men here who can come and go as they please," Janice answered his question one day. "In order for him to use that 'hunch factory' in his mind, he has to be able to get as much data as possible."

"I notice," Corby observed, "that he seems to think you're some sort of goddess incarnate. Is the feeling reciprocated?"

"In a way, yes. I think he's a wonderful kid, but, after all, he's only twenty-five."

"So young? I would have thought him a bit older."

Janice's brows came down in a frown. "It's his brother's influence. Jerry is thirty years older than Bob, and quite an adventurer—been all over the system and in almost every kind of jam—and Bob never saw Jerry until their parents died ten years ago. Jerry's parents were justly proud of their eldest, and eulogized him quite a bit. Bob suffers from acute hero-worship. To him, Jerry is the Perfect Man."

"And from the look in his eyes, you are the Perfect Woman."

She frowned at that. "In a way, I suppose he does. I guess I play nursemaid to him a little too much. But this gift of his has made him a little unstable, mentally—not much, you understand, but a little—and he has to get things off his chest once in a while. I suppose that since his parents died I'm his—well, wailing wall."

FOR four months, the great ship stood looking at the distant stars through the rock that covered it, waiting, brooding in its untested virginity, while puny men tried to find an unknown flaw in it.

Finally, the work was done. Corby had to face the Commission. Twenty-two men and women, among them

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the greatest minds in the System, from Co-ordinator Hammermill on down, sat waiting to hear his report.

Preliminaries over, Corby stood, looked at them, and began:

"Before I go into my results, I would like to say that, with Dr. Forbes' aid, this entire formulation has been worked over from end to end. The calculations were done on the computors, in sets of three so that any error that might be inherent in the circuits of one machine would be cancelled by the results of the other two. Each entry was checked six times—three by myself, three by Dr. Forbes. We have, we believe, checked the work to the practical limits of human ability, if it is to be done within any reasonable length of time.

"Our results are quite simply stated: I am satisfied, and Dr. Forbes is satisfied, that there is absolutely no flaw in the mathematics of the mass-time converter, the engineering of the vessel, or the drive mechanism."

He stopped and swept his eyes across the faces seated around him. There were a few murmurings, and finally Co-ordinator Hammermill asked a question, his lined face showing only a trace of anxiety.

"Do you have any further suggestions, Dr. Corby?"

Corby thought a moment. "Only that perhaps the ship's mechanism itself might be at fault. Has that been checked thoroughly?"

Bob Winfield stood up. "If I may interrupt at this point, I should like to make two statements."

"Go ahead, Bob," said Hammermill.

"First, sir, I have a hunch that Dr. Corby's entirely correct — the calculations are perfect. Second, I have a hunch that there is nothing wrong with the ship. Therefore, somehow, in some way, Dr. Corby's work, or his presence here, must have nullified my earlier prediction."

There was a general stirring among those present. Corby got the impression that each and every one of them had been wearing an invisible straitjacket, and Winfield's words had somehow cut them loose.

No one seemed to pay any more attention to Corby. They prodded Bob with questions, smiled among themselves, and made plans for the ship's course to Alpha Centauri.

Corby left the room after a few minutes and walked slowly back toward Math Section. For some reason, he felt dissatisfied, as though Bob's earlier hunch had somehow taken hold on his own mind and wouldn't leave.

He heard footsteps behind him and turned.

"Oh, hello, Bob."

"I just came to say I'm sorry for all this, Dr. Corby," Winfield said earnestly. "Now that your work is done, you won't have anything to do, and they'll confine you to quarters until the ship is ready to leave. But don't look so downhearted; Jerry is going to leave for Alpha Cen-

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tauri in less than a week, and you can leave for Earth then." There was pride in his voice as he spoke his brother's name.

Corby rubbed a finger across his lower lip. "I hate to feel useless around here. I think I'll ask Hammermill if he won't let me help with the astrogation problems. Do you think he'd okay it?"

"I'm sure he would, Dr. Corby," Bob said levelly. Then he turned on his heel and strode off down the corridor.

Corby shook his head. *Funny kid,* he thought.

CORBY didn't sleep well that night, at least for the first hour or two. He kept feeling that somewhere he had missed something, some little gimmick that might be the answer to Bob's hunches.

When he awoke, his head was uncomfortable, his neck felt twisted, as though he had slept on it wrong. He opened his eyes and tried to shift to a more comfortable position.

But when he tried to move, he found he couldn't.

It required several minutes of concentration to get it straight in his mind just what had happened. For some reason his mind didn't seem to work with its usual clarity.

He was strapped tight, hands, feet, arms, legs, abdomen, chest, and neck, with a broad webbing that was wide enough to hold him tight without cutting into his flesh. Quite obviously, he wasn't strapped to his own bed, nor was he even in the room which had been assigned him at Project Aspirin.

The walls were a blank, staring white. Over to his left there was a window with the blinds closed tight.

A window!

Not on the moon. There simply weren't any windows on Luna.

That meant — *he was back on Earth!*

Wheeeeewhooooo!

The noise irritated him, somehow, like the grating of teeth on a piece of broken glass. What the devil was it?

His thoughts were interrupted by the click of a door sliding open. Corby watched silently from under nearly-closed lids as the man came in. He was a tallish fellow, with dark hair and a thin, grey-looking face.

Not, he realized, that the face meant anything. It would be foolish to suppose that it was anything but a mask.

"All right, Dr. Corby, the drug has worn off by now. You can quit pretending." The man's voice was faintly buzzy due to the voice-changing mechanism strapped around his throat.

Wheeeeewhooooo! The almost inaudible rushing sound came again.

"What do you want?" Corby asked levelly.

"Nothing, just now. I just wanted to make sure you were in good health." He looked at Corby speculatively for a minute or two, then turned and left. The door slid shut

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behind him.

Wheeeeewhoooooo! The noise came again. Corby tried again to analyze it, as though there were something there that would give him the key to everything.

For the next several hours, he listened to that pitch-changing whistle. It seemed to come from far below—and yet, in a way, it was almost level with him. It—

He was dozing a little when the truth came. The shock was so great that he attempted to jerk himself out of the bed in which he lay, and he almost strangled because of the pressure on his throat.

He knew what the unforeseen factor was. And he knew, beyond all shadow of doubt, that he had to stop the ship from taking off.

HIS mind whirled for minutes as he tried to think of some way—any way—to get back to Project Aspirin in time. In time to prevent one of the most monstrous mistakes in human history.

Time moved on endlessly. Three times the diffused light outside the window dimmed, settling the room into darkness; three times it brightened again as day came.

Once each day, the gray-faced man came in and fed him, saying nothing, asking no questions, and answering none.

On the morning of the fourth day, Corby found his chance. Each day, he had strained with all his strength against the straps that were holding him, and finally, one of them gave a little. Cautiously, carefully, he worked at it, tore it strand by strand, until finally one hand was free.

By the time Gray-face came in for his inspection, Corby was ready for him.

One hand brushed aside the now loose straps, the other slammed at the plate the other man was holding, smashing it into his face.

Gray-face lashed out with a foot, catching Corby in the side before he had a chance to get completely off the bed. Instinctively, Corby grabbed at the foot, and it kept on going up. Gray-face fell backward, his back hitting the floor with an agonizing smack.

But he still wasn't out. Corby, his side a mass of bruised pain, leaped at the man on the floor just in time to keep him from getting a little knockout gun into play.

His headlong smash wasn't accurate enough to do any real harm, but it knocked all the breath out of Gray-face, and sent the knockout gun sliding across the floor.

Corby had been exposed to four months of Lunar gravity, and this sudden exposure to full Earth pull left him feeing a little weak. Luckily, Gray-face didn't seem much better off.

Twist, roll, jab and slam! For the space of two or three minutes, Corby still wasn't quite sure which man would get the best of it, but finally his opponent began to weaken.

With one last swing of his fist,

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Corby managed to make Gray-face's head connect loudly with the floor. Gray-face suddenly felt like a suitful of lumpy sawdust in Corby's grasp.

He didn't even bother to take off the mask; he didn't care who the man was. The thing uppermost in his mind was getting out of there. He grabbed the knockout gun and started toward the door.

The door was locked.

CORBY ran back across the room toward Gray-face. The key must be somewhere in his pocket. But, search as he might, he could find nothing.

He lifted the unconscious man off the floor and strapped him securely to the bed, tying down the one hand that had been left free by the broken strap with a strip of the man's clothing.

Then he felt under the collar until his fingers grasped the edges of the plexiskin mask. He peeled it off, and sat looking at the face dully, his mind spinning with questions.

Finally, he began to slap the face with a slow back-and-forth motion. Slap! Slap! Slap slap slap!

Robert Winfield's eyes fluttered open.

"All right, Bob," Corby said tiredly, "how do I get out of here?"

"Do you think I'm going to tell you?" the boy mumbled through split lips. "You can rot here for all I care." He tried to put a sneer in his voice, but it didn't come off too well.

"Why did you do it, Bob?" Corby knew Winfield was ready to tell, ready to lash out with whatever hate was stored within his mind.

"To keep you away from Janice, you rotten thief! She's mine, and I'm not going to let you have her! I saw you. I saw you half a hundred times, talking to her. Always together, always whispering to each other! But I've got you here, now. And even if you did get out, the Government Police would get you." He laughed, chokingly. "You see, they think you're a spy. They're going to launch the ship today, before anything can happen."

Then there was pride in his voice as he said: "My brother is going to be the first man to go to the stars!"

"No, Bob." Corby felt brutal, but it had to be done. "If you don't tell me how to get out of here, Jerry Winfield will be the first man to die in an interstellar ship."

Carefully, one step at a time, he told Robert Winfield how his hunches had been right.

CORBY moved down the darkened corridor as noiselessly and rapidly as possible. Now that he was away from the little gravity generator the Winfield boy had hidden in the floor of the unused room, it was easy to make time against the moon's light gravity.

The elaborate hoax of the whole thing was terrifying in its complexity. The false window, with its sim-

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ulated daylight, the gravity generator, the cot with the straps, all of them prepared so that Corby would think he was on Earth, a victim of some other group of schemers.

Corby turned the corner into a well-lighted main corridor, and almost ran into a Police guard. He brought up the knockout gun just as the guard turned, and pulled the trigger. The guard dropped, jerking.

The corridor ended in a door. He flung it open, and stood for a moment, surprise touching the surface of his mind.

The door led to a balcony overlooking the construction site. Above and below him was the featureless blackness of the great ship, posed and waiting for flight.

Somewhere in the vast chamber, a loudspeaker boomed out: ATTENTION! ATTENTION, ALL PERSONNEL! CLEAR THE LAUNCHING AREA WITHIN THIRTY MINUTES! THE EVACUATION PUMPS WILL BEGIN REMOVING THE AIR FROM THE LAUNCHING CHAMBER AT THAT TIME, IN ORDER THAT THE EXIT DOOR LEADING TO THE SURFACE MAY BE OPENED. PLEASE HAVE EVERYTHING IN READINESS AT THAT TIME.

Corby felt a cold chill in spite of the warmth of the room. Thirty minutes! He couldn't possiby make it to the bottom in that time, unfamiliar as he was with the layout of this section of the caverns. Besides, he'd have to dodge guards every inch of the way.

He looked down, toward the bottom of the pit. They had shut out nearly all the lights up in this sector, but he could see the brightly lit area of the floor nearly a thousand feet below.

He counted the balconies that were at every level beneath him. Thirty-eight. They were about twenty feet apart and—

There *was* a way! He made a few quick mental calculations. Acceleration: one hundred sixty-seven centimeters per second squared. Mass: about ninety kilograms. Distance: a little less than seven hundred centimeters.

He could make it.

Quickly, he swung his body over the edge of the rail, hung by his hands, and let go.

Under Luna's light gravitational pull, he fell slowly toward the next balcony. His hands reached, grabbed the railing, and broke his fall. Then he let go again.

Down, down, down. Catch, hold drop. Over and over again. Endlessly. Thirty-eight times it had to be done. Once he missed and catching the next railing wrenched his arms agonizingly. His palms were sweaty, and he had to stop once to wipe them, one at a time, on his tunic. Then, down again.

His shoulders and arms ached, and little pains shot through his body from the beating he had taken from the Winfield boy.

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He thought: *Not many people below—hope they don't look up — probably won't—look at the Monster if they do—*

His mind felt confused. It seemed to take an eternity to go down this way. Was this number twenty or twenty-one?

Finally, there was only one balcony between him and the floor of the construction chamber. He swung himself inward, and hit the balcony rolling. For some reason, his body didn't seem to have its normal resiliency; it felt numb and stiff.

For an instant his mind thought crazily of dropping down the side of the Old Empire State Building. It was about the same distance, but he never would have made it under Earth gravity. Then, weakly, he forced his body to move.

He peered over the edge of the balcony. It didn't seem odd that Janice Forbes should be standing below him; the shock of coincidence was too weak to affect his deadened nerves.

"Janice!" he called softly. "Janice Forbes! Up here!"

She swung around. Her eyes widened, and with one smooth, swift motion, she drew the gun at her side.

"Don't shoot." He held his hands high. "Let me explain."

CORBY seemed to ache everywhere, even in places he knew hadn't been strained. He lay on the bed, listening disinterestedly to the buzzing of voices around him.

One of the Police guards was saying: "We found the Winfield boy just where Dr. Corby said he was. We've taken him to the hospital; he thinks he's killed his brother. He's quite insane."

"I see." It was Hammermill's voice. "Well, Janice, what is the explanation?"

"I'll let him tell it, but believe me, he's right. If we had launched that ship, we'd have lost it."

Co-ordinator Hammermill cleared his throat. "Dr. Corby, this whole incident is damned odd, but just on your reputation, and on Dr. Forbes' recommendation, we have postponed the launching. Now—why?"

Corby opened his eyes. His voice was low. "It's so simple we overlooked it. We never even thought about it. You see, all of Bob Winfield's hunches were right. We *had* made an error in calculations, but it wasn't the ship, either theoretically or mathematically.

"It came to me up there in that room. I kept hearing an odd sound —a high note coming toward me that suddenly dropped in pitch and went away. It was a tubeway."

Hammermill nodded. "Yes, there's a tubeway on that level."

"The Doppler Effect," Corby continued. "As the car approached, the wave peaks of sound were crowded together, and the pitch sounded higher than it really was. As it left, the

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wave peaks were stretched apart, making the sound seem lower than it really was. That was the key.

"The same thing happens with light. As a luminous body recedes, its spectrum is shifted toward the red; if it is approaching, the spectrum is shifted toward the violet.

"Now, imagine what would happen if a ship, moving at close to the velocity of light, were to approach a sun. Every bit of radiant energy, including heat, would be shifted up high into the spectrum—up, past hard gamma, into the wave lengths of cosmic rays themselves. You can imagine, I think, what would happen if the entire energy of the sun were converted to such hard radiation. The ship would become so violently radioactive that it would become an atomic bomb. Just a flash and a puff of radiation."

There was a silence, then.

"Can we lick it?" Hammermill asked, finally, a slight strain in his voice.

"I don't know, but we can try." Corby lay back, eyes closed. "We can try." His voice faded as he drifted into sleep.

THE END

NEWS OF THE MONTH

Latest reports on what our readers are doing. Fan clubs, social events and personalities in the limelight.

Bob "Wilson" Tucker has at last deserted the field of mystery stories for science-fiction. His latest book, *The Red Herring,* will be the last of the Charles Horne series for some time. His first science-fiction novel, *The City of The Sea,* is scheduled for release in October.

If you get a chance to see the science-fiction movie "Five," don't miss it. It's an "after the atom bomb" story dealing with the last five people on earth. Despite the heavy use of coincidence to bring these five survivors together, the picture is extremely realistic. In particular, the opening scenes and the excursions into dead and deserted cities leave you with the uneasy feeling that perhaps you ought to peer out the theater door and reassure yourself that *it* hasn't already happened.

H. T. Bowers of New Philadelphia, Ohio has just finished collecting the 51st prize he won in the "Test Piece" contest. He spent the week of July 15th thru the 21st at your Editor's Wisconsin farm. And he has photo-

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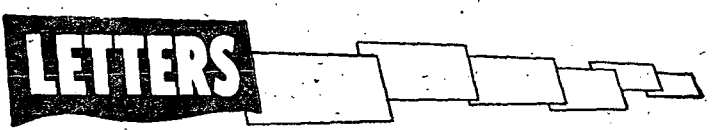
graphs to prove that the fish (which more than lived up to your Editor's claims) were really "that big," and they didn't get away from him.

And speaking of contests, don't neglect the current one on page 121 of this issue. In the reader's column Joel Markman suggests that we run the cover as a painting without bothering to have a story written for it. Well, we didn't intend to do it, but it seems that we've accidentally granted Joel's request. So all of you readers (and especially you, Joel) get out your paper and pen to see what you can do about winning the OTHER WORLDS Cover Contest.

The Chicago Science Fiction Society had a special meeting July 15th in honor of Wendayne and Forrest J. Ackerman. Homeward bound from their recent tour of Europe, the Ackermans took time off to give the CFSF members an account of the London convention, and to tell of meeting such well known British writers as Eric Frank Russell, John Beynon Harris, William Temple and Arthur C. Clarke.

See you at the Nolacon, Sept. 1, 2, and 3.



DOUGLAS MITCHELL

Well at last I've decided to take typer in hand and type you a little propaganda on the merits of Canada and why we Canadian fen should get your mag OTHER WORLDS other than through a sub.

Why don't I sub? Well, to tell the truth, I've got so many other committments that I can't afford to do that. Besides, what's the matter with your circulation department that we don't get OTHER WORLDS here? As is, I've got two copies out of your twelve or thirteen that have been printed, with dim prospects to the future for further ishs. So?? When do we get them? I can't figure out why. After all, you must have quite a few left-over copies that no one buys out there, so why don't you shunt them over here?? Huh??

I think I'll compliment you on your mag now, what little I've seen of it as of yet. No doubt you've still got good stories, I presume. And art work? Incidentally, I saw three ishs in a row in a store which practically all contained your stories. What gives? Incidentally (again) I saw that they were priced at 75c per, which might give you an idea of what luck we collectors have in getting them.

Before I die of lack of your mag, hows about sending a few to the stands around here, or else give me three good reasons why you won't.

Ste 11-406 Notre Dame Ave.
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

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Well, Doug, try as we might, we couldn't find three good reasons for not distributing OW in Canada so as of the last (September) issue you'll find it on your Canadian newsstands. And—for just 35c, *the same price U.S. fans pay for it. By the way, we can supply you Canadian collectors with back issues of OW at the regular price of* 35c (*not* 75c) *each . . . . . Ed*

ZOLTAN KARASSY

I've just received OW No. 12 and was shocked and surprised on reading your editorial. Imagine, Mr. Shaver having so many pen names, and the best ones in OW, at that. It doesn't seem possible that Shaver, Irwin and Dexter are one and the same person, although I was suspicious of Amherst being Shaver. The Irwin and Dexter stories seem to be of a different caliber than Shaver's. Their stories are interesting and full of action, adventure and romance while Shaver spoils the story with too many details. As long as Shaver writes Irwin and Dexter style, I'll be happy.

Also in the editorial, I read about your special issue. Now you've got me so interested I can hardly wait for it. And Ed, if you do write a story, how about a novel? Your stories are good, but short.

While glancing through the issue I came upon Byrne's story. The last Byrne story to appear was in issue No. 6. I hope I don't have to wait another six issues for the "Golden Guardsmen" or some other Byrne story.

Now for the comments and suggestions. 1—The glue. The last issue nearly came apart before I finished reading it. If you have to use glue, use staples with it. 2—More illos in your novels. This has been mentioned before. 3—This one's a reminder. Remember on the back cover of your first issue you had a list of coming stories. One of them, "Project Pilwee", hasn't shown up yet. Since the first issue was long ago, I thought maybe you'd forgotten about it.

Now for the compliments. I see you've taken my advice and let down on Rog Phillips, and that he has written a novel which I read is coming soon. I rate his first story (Elmer Wilde) the best. I like all of your covers but, one, the exception being issue No. 11—too sexy. All of yours I like but the one I mentioned. I especially like Malcolm Smith's covers. Bok is second choice. How about some more Smith covers like that one on issue No. 5. I also like your inside cover stories. Keep it up. I see you're getting a wider collection of authors for OW. Good! I'm always glad when I see one of my favorite authors appear in OW. Am I satisfied? No! How about some stories by Ed Hamilton and Emmit McConnel. And another thing, I've never seen a Poul Anderson short story until in your mag. Try to get a novel or novelette from him. There has been a great improvement in the quality of your stories since the last time I wrote you. Now they're longer and better. I congratulate you on getting hold of Mack Reynolds, I get many a laugh when I read his stories.

Where is there a science-fiction club in Detroit?

9197 Melville
Detroit 17, Mich.

We'll answer your last question first—there's a very active science-fiction club in Detroit, The Detroit Science Fiction League. We don't have the address, but perhaps one of its members will read this and drop you a card. We'll see what can be done about getting stories from

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the authors you mention, and as for covers, take a look at the Malcolm Smith cover on the next issue of OW . . . . . Ed

JOEL MARKMAN

You came. I saw. I bought. I read. You conquered.

The 12th issue of OW is without a doubt the best all around one that you've run. You even did away with those insipid short features written especially by the editor to fill up what I consider much more appealing, blank space.

You printed an interesting article with a promise of more to come.

You ran a decent story by yourself. I agree with the managing editor about the others. I also didn't comment on how lousy those Shaver stories were because I didn't want to insult you and your staff (I thought you had written them). I think you are an egotist if the covers were painted for the stories, if not, you should have left their meaning in obscurity. You might have done better with something totally from your own imagination.

TIME FLAW by Russell Branch was the best in many an issue, and I have only one beef (this goes for Byrne, too) why can't the characters speak decent English?

The Cartier for FLEDERMAUS REPORT was terrific. The story, though lacking a decent plot, was humorous. Why don't you get Cartier to do a cover for you? He's terrific in color.

"The Missionaries," "Mr. Yellow Jacket", "Beyond The Darkness" and the Bloch story I rate in that order after "Fledermaus". The Bloch story was only fair and came close to ruining the issue.

There is a marked improvement in the work of your regular illustrators and the cover was better than the others done by McCauley.

Probably the most worthwhile comment I can make is that the quality of OW is increasing while that of other magazines is on a downward slope. I mean it, too.

1560 Grand Concourse
Bronx 56, New York

We haven't noticed particularly that the quality of stories in other magazines is going down, but you can bet that we're glad to hear you say the quality of OW is going up. That's what we're aiming at—to make each issue better than the last . . . . . Ed

BARNEY E. BRITCH

Since the age of ten I have been a science-fiction addict, as I perfer to call myself, but this is my first fan letter to any magazine during that time. (I'm now thirty years old.)

I have just finished "Beyond The Darkness" by S. J. Byrne. It is beyond a doubt the most interesting and emotionally gripping story I have ever read, *bar none*. My thanks and admiration go out to OW for having printed it, and especially to the author Mr. Byrne, who even now has been "jet propelled" to the number one spot on my list of authors. Congratulations, again.

115 Yesler Way
Seattle 4, Wash.

"Beyond The Darkness" is certainly bringing in high praise from our readers, and we want to assure you right now that we'll be hearing much more in the way of superior stories from Mr. Byrne in the future . . . Ed

HAROLD HOSTETLER

Wonderful! Yes, that's what I said. Wonderful! A really penetrating ish that went off with a *zap!*

Three stories in the June-July OW

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were right up there. Right on top. They were: "Beyond The Darkness", "Time Flaw", and "The Tin You Love To Touch" in that order. The other three stories were good too, but couldn't measure up to the others. They ranked: 4—"The Fledermaus Report", 5—Mr. Yellow Jacket", and 6—"The Missionaries".

The cover didn't really belong on such a good issue of OW. Something that would have assuredly matched the zine would have been a Bok illo for "The Tin You Love To Touch" or a Smith one for "Beyond The Darkness". A female robot by Bok or a space cover showing the dark nebula and the two space boats by Smith would most certainly have been better for such an outstanding issue of OW. What covers they would be!

Your editorial was, as usual, very good and also very interesting. So was the article by Richardson on the artist, J. Allen St. John.

Well, enough orchids for this time. Now to some other business. I would like to hear from some fan clubs who want an artist to do pen and ink illustrations. That's me. I also do some short-short stf writing. Any teen-age fan who wishes correspondence may also write. I'm eighteen.

Box 163
Cairnbrook, Pa.

Orchids are always appreciated, Hal, so keep on sending them and we'll keep on trying to merit them. And all you fanzine editors, take note. Here's an artist-writer looking for a home for his material . . . Ed

RAY CAPELLA, JR.

Quick, Rap, 'fore the little men in the white coats get here . . . you've got to . . .

Oh, excuse me. I haven't explained. It seems that in the letter of mine you printed in the last OW I apparently contradicted myself. This seemed a hint to the little men in the white coats that I'd flipped my lid and had a split personality. On top of that, there'll be letters from wondering fans . . . I just want to straighten it out.

What I meant to say was that there's a lot of slick stf going around today, the mag I mentioned being one of the pro's that publishes it. Then I said (meant, anyhow) that if OTHER WORLDS was gonna publish stf, it had to be stf as good as that going around in the other mags such as aSF and Galaxy. Next thing you knew, I was saying I didn't like said magazine. Well, I don't. I like good stf, but not too much of it (which is what made aSF too specialized).

That is why I like OW. It has everything from stf to horror stories to fts. Oh, get hep, old boy, fts is a new word in the field—short for fantasy (which is, by the way, one of the fields in adventure I like best!).

Another reason, which I mentioned before, is OW's art work. Take last issue's Mac cover—I never dreamed he could be *that* good. It was one of the weirdest—and most beautiful—things I've seen. With artists like him, Bok, Smith, Cartier and Tillotson, you can't go wrong.

Well, I believe my letter's too long already, in which case it might not get printed and then the little men in the white coats might carry me away. So I'll part with one wish—that you get long stories by Hamilton, Wilcox, Shaver, Phillips, and some new (?) writer called Ray Palmer.

480 Clinton Ave.
Brooklyn 16, New York

There, Ray, we've printed your letter, so perhaps the little men in white will leave you alone. How-

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ever, we wouldn't be surprised to see them turn up at our office—that's how confused we are from your letter and your 2nd letter of explanation. It still sounds to us like you're saying that in order to be good, OW will have to publish stories like aSF and Galaxy—which you don't like. So we're going to forget all that, latch on to your one statement "That is why I like OW", and hope for the best . . . . . Ed

TONY MARTINICH

Enclosed you will find a money order to pay for a continuation of my sub to OW. I don't need to tell you I have enjoyed reading it, but I feel I just have to.

It's nice to see the fans' wishes come true and turn OW into the best fan's mag in existance. I've gotten quite a kick out of reading the letters and then seeing the mag change to just the thing the letters wanted.

I'm glad to see the stories on the inside covers. Let's have more. Now I've got something I'd like to see in OW. Let's bring back serials! Huh? How about it? I know that I, for one, can wait six weeks for a serial. I have to wait that long to get the mag now, and nothing could be harder.

If the rest of my letter does not get in the letter column, I'd like to have it known I'm in the market for back issues (pre '50) of aSF and Unknown. I've heard about Unknown in the mags, but have never seen one. Is it still being sold, and how can I get it if it is.

Don't forget—serials!

1235A W. Washington St.
Milwaukee 4, Wisconsin

Unknown hasn't been published for quite some time, but perhaps some of our readers have copies for sale. Or, you might watch the Personals Column in case there are some advertised there. So you like the way we change OW to suit the readers, do you. Well, suppose we follow your advice and give you serials. And just to prove that we mean it, we're giving you the first installment of "I Flew In A Flying Saucer" in this very issue . . . . . Ed

CHARLES NUETZEL

I just wanted to say something about the June-July issue of OW. As yet I have not had a chance to read any of the stories—which look very good. But I did read the story—or rather, article—about J. Allen St. John, and it was good!

I have always liked St. John's work. I was introduced to it, as were many others, through Edgar Rice Burroughs. The article, as far as I am concerned, was perfect except for one fact—it was too short.

To get to the magazine itself, I would like to say something about it.

I want to tell you how much I liked the cover, and that I was glad to see "by Ray Palmer" on it. I don't mean to butter you up or to flatter you, but I do like to read your stories. In the May issue you had "Red Coral" which I liked very much.

Here are a few questions:

1—Why don't you have some serials?
2—Why don't you get some of Fredric Brown's stories?
3—Why—if you can—don't you get J. Allen St. John to paint you some covers? He's good, you know.
4—Why don't you cut—or rather use the same kind of paper as Imagination? It looks much better than it did before. OW is too

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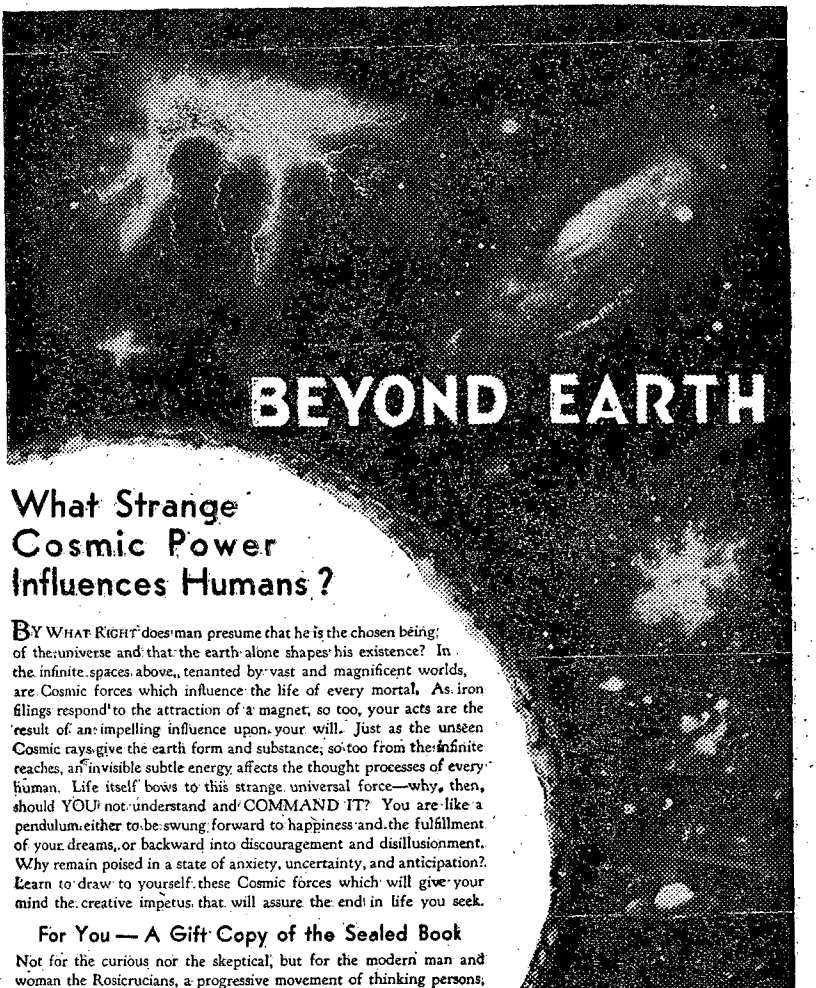

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thick.

5—Why don't you get a fan corner like Fandora's Box in Imagination and The Club House in Amazing?

6—Why do authors go by so many names? Why can't they keep one and leave it like that?

16452 Moorpark St.
Encino, California

Six questions—let's see if we can supply six answers. 1—*Starting with this issue, here are your serials.* 2—*We published a Fredric Brown story in the September OW, and will give you more in the future.* 3—*St. John has done some beautiful covers for our sister magazine FATE, and we'll see if we can't get him to do some for OW.* 4—*The paper we now use in OW was chosen because it can stand the test of time. In a few years your collection of OW mags will still be in good condition, with a minimum of yellowing and brittleness. However, our readers are our guides, and if they all say "Change to a different paper" . . .* 5—*For the very reason that fan news is covered by Amazing and Imagination, we decided to devote space to features like Personals rather than duplicate these fan columns.* 6—*The most common reason authors use pen names is to keep different writing styles separate. As some one pointed out earlier in this column, Dexter, Irwin and Shaver write different types of stories, yet all are the same man . . . Ed*

ELDON K. EVERETT

Before I begin to knock the stories, mind if I wax nostalgic? For the last few weeks my mind has been dwelling on two subjects. The first one is "old fans never die, they just fade away". I mean it, What ever happened to King Kennedy of JoKe? Chadderbox? Rick Sneary? John Van Couvering? Rex Ward? W. Paul Ganley? These are just a few of recent years. For six months to a year, these guys have letters published in every ish of every mag, then they disappear. What happens to them? Oh, I'll admit that I'm rapidly becoming one of those actifen, and so is Jan Romanoff. I'm worried. What becomes of these fen? Maybe they really do "fade away."

The second subject is Edgar Rice Burroughs. I want books by our lord Burroughs. I want to contact all fen who are Burroughsians.

Maybe now the fen will let Dick Shaver bring back his entertaining Mystery. Rap, in your article in FATE you should have elaborated a little more on the Mystery.

Science-fiction is changing. OW is about the only mag that retains the old flavor. I began stf on Shaver and Captain Future. The way stf is going, I'm rapidly losing interest in it.

Wha hoppen to the promised Tharnovel? Could you get Edmond Hamilton? I think we'd all enjoy a Captain Future novel. And inside cover articles on "The Thing", "The Man From Planet X" and "When Worlds Collide."

P.O. Box 513
Tacoma, Washington

We've been hearing from you so often, Ev, that if you should miss an issue we won't feel that the mag is complete. Yes, old fans do have a habit of disappearing, but we can solve one mystery for you. JoKe decided that it was time he stopped contributing free wordage to mags via their letters columns and turned his energy to writing a story. You'll see it on page 4 of this issue—Music From Down Under by Joquel Kennedy. A lot of fans that disappear from the scene return later on the

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professional side of the fence, and still more move directly from fandom to the pro ranks. For example, take people like Kennedy, Joe Gibson, Judith Merril, Bob Tucker, Ackerman, Bradbury and countless others. You'll get that Tharn story eventually, and stories by Shaver. No Mystery, as we agreed to abide by the decision of the readers to present stf and fantasy by Shaver but to omit his Mystery in OW . . . . Ed

BOB GOODNEY

I enjoyed your June-July issue very much. The stories on the whole were fairly good. I would rate them this way:

1—Beyond The Darkness . . . Good
2—The Tin You Love To Touch . . . Good.
3—Time Flaw . . . Good.
4—The Missionaries . . . Fair.
5—The Fledermaus Report . . . Fair.
6—Mr. Yellow Jacket . . . Fair.

Let's have more stories by Robert Bloch, he's good. Have him write a long novel for your mag.

I think you should have your letter section longer. After all, if the stories aren't too good you can always have fun reading the letters other fans send in.

Keep up the Personals. This is excellent, and one of the main reasons (besides the good stories) I buy your magazine.

Keep up the good work.

700 Ellis Avenue
Ashland, Wisconsin

How's this for a start toward a longer letters section? And don't worry, we'll keep all of OW's regular features and even add new ones . . Ed

THE END

A. MERRITT (*Continued from inside front cover*)

It should prove of considerable interest to readers of science fiction and fantasy to know something about the life of the Master of Fantasy.

Abraham Merritt was born January 20, 1884 at Beverly, New Jersey about twenty-five miles from Philadelphia. Mr. Merritt's grandfather, a Quaker, was an architect and builder, who designed and erected many churches and other stately buildings in that part of Pennsylvania. Mr. Merritt's ancestors were among the early settlers of America, and the Merritt family in the colonies dates back to 1621. A. Merritt's father's name was William Henry Merritt and he was also an architect and builder. His mother's name was Ida Priscilla Buck. Fenimore Cooper is one of Merritt's early American ancestors.

When Mr. Merritt was about ten years old, his parents moved to Philadelphia. When he was thirteen he finished Grammar School with honors and entered Philadelphia High School. After attending there for a year he decided to study for the law profession. Therefore, he was allowed to quit high school and go into the office of Andrew J. Maloney, one of the outstanding estate lawyers in Philadelphia. While "reading law" and studying for the legal profession he read all of Blackstone and other legal classics. Also, at the advice of Mr. Maloney, who considered the Bible, as useful in law as Blackstone, he made an extensive

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study of the Bible which was already familiar to him. Mr. Merritt once stated that "Whatever proficiency in English and Latin that I may possess I owe it to the Bible and Blackstone." As a part of his training program in studying law with Mr. Maloney, Merritt attended lectures at the University of Pennsylvania.

During this period Merritt acquired knowledge which had quite an impact on his future life and career. He had an unusually retentive memory and the faculty of rapid reading. Like Shelley and other great men, he read by seeing whole paragraphs of print as "pictures," rather than reading line by line and sentence by sentence. He also had an omnivorous curiosity about everything. These various qualities, along with keen intellect, enabled Merritt to literally gain the equivalent of a specialized college course during these years.

In 1902 when he was eighteen, he began to feel that the newspaper business was where he belonged. One of his very good friends was a star reporter for the *PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER* and through him he was able to get a job as a reporter for this great newspaper. He remained with the *PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER* until 1911, finally rising to the position of Night City Editor. Merritt as a reporter had a special talent for "feature writing". He rose rapidly on *THE INQUIRER*, covering murders, suicides, hangings, mysteries, romances, lynchings and political stories. In his spare time he served as special Philadelphia correspondent for Morrill Goddard who had recently taken over *THE AMERICAN WEEKLY* for William Randolph Hearst. At this time the publication was simply called "The Sunday Supplement" of the Hearst Sunday newspapers. It was in 1912 that he left *THE INQUIRER* to become Goddard's associate on *THE AMERICAN WEEKLY*. When Goddard died in 1937, Merritt became the Editor, and held this post until his death. Under his Editorship *THE AMERICAN WEEKLY* grew from a circulation around 5,000,000 to nearly 8,000,000.

Merritt died suddenly of a heart attack on August 21, 1943. With his wife, Eleanor, Merritt went down to Clearwater, Florida for a combination business and pleasure trip. He was the owner of the Banboxes, a small colony of homes at Indian Rocks Beach, near Clearwater. It was here that the end suddenly came, and fantasy lovers all over the globe realized they had lost the greatest writer of them all - - - the Master of Fantasy.

II

Several events in the life of A. Merritt had a tremendous influence on his career as a writer. Back when he was a very young man studying law in Philadelphia he met two men who influenced potently his thinking. One of these men was a well-known writer and scientist, Dr. S. Weir Mitchell. At this time he was carrying on his classic experiments in the medical properties of rattle snake venom. Dr. Mitchell took an interest in Merritt and talked with him about folklore and its modern survivals and other speculative and unorthodox phenomena. It was through Dr. Mitchell's influence that he read widely in the little explored paths of literature.

The other man who had profound influence on Merritt was Dr. Charles Eucharist de Medicis Sajous, whose studies and discoveries about the ductless glands and their effect upon personality paved the way to most of the modern discoveries about

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them. However, at that time the discoveries of this well-known doctor were considered by the conservative wing of the medical party as somewhat too unorthodox.

Merritt's interest in science and literature was stimulated greatly by his friendship with these men of letters. Merritt made quite a study of witchcraft practices, survivals of blood sacrifices and other psychic phenomena of the Pennsylvania Dutch region. He also read widely about such subjects as "magic," "sorcery," and comparative religions. This data he turned over to Dr. S. Weir Mitchell.

Another event in the life of A. Merritt was instrumental in giving him a background for some of his supernatural stories of later years. During his apprenticeship as a newspaper man, he was the unfortunate witness of a singularly unhappy political incident. Because he qualified as an essential witness, it was expedient that he should be out of the states for awhile. The consequence of these complications was that Merritt got a speedy trip to Mexico and other points south where extradition writs did not exist. While in Mexico and Central America he first developed a powerful interest in archaeology and in the habits and customs of primitive peoples. The story is related by Mr. Merritt that after befriending an Indian in Miraflores he was made a member of the tribe by full blood rites. He spent more than a year "south of the border," much of this time in Tohuantepee and Chiapas. He went treasure hunting in Yucatan with a party from an Eastern University Museum, and was one of the first white men to enter the ancient Mayan city of Tuluum. Later he fished in the Cenote, or "sacred well" at Chichen-Itya but didn't catch anything. He tried to get Capital interested in dredging it but failed. A few years later golden objects worth several millions of dollars were taken from this well. While in Costa Rica word came that the cloud was lifted in Philadelphia. He regretfully left for the states and a few months later was reporting for *THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER*.

Mr. Merritt had some very unusual hobbies. It is said that he kept one of the strangest flower gardens in the country. As a hobby he grew many strange and exotic drugs and flowers such as the Peruvian daffodil, the Mexican shell lily, and the African trumpet. His horticultural interests also included the growing of the datum, the mandrake, the monkhood, and other plants with weird histories which produced powerful drugs and poisons. His main interest was in sub-tropical plants. On his experimental farm near Clearwater, Florida he grew nearly two hundred varieties of trees and plants from South and Central America, Africa, Asia, and Australia. Here he planted the first grove of olive trees in Florida. Near Bradenton, Florida on another experimental farm he grew avocados, cherimoyas, mangoes, and litchi. He also grew in Florida, Brazilian Feijoa plants which bear a delicious fruit, and whose flowers are the only edible flowers known.

Merritt also had a burning interest in archaeology and wrote several papers on archaeological and ethnological subjects. Most of these were either privately printed or held in manuscript form. He also read and wrote about strange rites, superstitions, mythology, folklore, and aspecially about modern survivals of ancient religions and pagan cults. He was greatly interested in medieval magic and witchcraft. He wove much

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of this knowledge of the macabre into his stories.

Merritt was called an expert apiarist, and received keen enjoyment out of experimenting with bees. He used this knowledge to good effect in his story "The Drone Man."

The many adventures and unusual hobbies and interests of Merritt provided much knowledge and background material for his famous tales of fantastic adventure.

III

A. Merritt, during most of his adult life was an editor by day, but he became a writer at night. He turned out most of his fiction in the study of his home on Cloverdale Road, in Hollis, Queens, New York, where he had shelf upon shelf of books dealing with demonology, witchcraft, science fiction, fantasy, and weird subjects.

Merritt wrote slowly and he wrote primarily to please himself. It is said that whenever he finished a story he was profoundly depressed for a time because it was no better. This, however, did not apply to his novelette "The Woman of the Wood" which was his favorite story. It was his one and only "one hundred per cent perfect fantasy."

Like Edgar Rice Burroughs, Ray Cummings, Max Brand, Frances Stevens and many others, A. Merritt was a discovery of the fabulous Bob Davis of the Frank A. Munsey publications. His very first published story was a short story entitled, "Through the Dragon Glass," which appeared in the November 24, 1917 issue of *ALL STORY WEEKLY*. This was followed by another short story, "The People of the Pit" in the January 5, 1918 issue of the same periodical. These stories were well liked by readers and it seemed obvious that this new writer of "different" stories, as they were called in those days, had a unique flair for the bizarre.

However, it was not until the appearance of his novelette "The Moon Pool" in the June 22, 1918 *ALL STORY WEEKLY* that his fame became anything like sensational. For months the Readers' column was literally crammed with readers' comments lauding "The Moon Pool" and begging for a sequel. Finally, with the February 15, 1919 issue of *ALL STORY*, Merritt's first long novel, "The Conquest of the Moon Pool" began as a six-part serial. This story established him as a Master of Fantasy. That same year (1919) Putnam published both "The Moon Pool" and its sequel "The Conquest of the "Moon Pool" in book form, under the former title.

During this same year with the August 9, 1919 issue of *ALL STORY* Merritt's hauntingly lovely short "Three Lines of Old French" was presented to the reading public.

In the meantime *ALL-STORY* had combined with *ARGOSY*, the oldest of the Munsey magazines, and beginning as an eight-part serial in the August 7, 1920 number of *ARGOSY - ALL STORY WEEKLY* was Merritt's most controversial novel, "The Metal Monster." Although it contained some of his very finest writings, Merritt was never quite pleased with it, and it never appeared in regular book form. (However, it was issued a few years back as an AVON Pocket Book.) Later it appeared as an eleven-part serial beginning in the October 1927 *SCIENCE AND INVENTION*. For this second appearance it was given the title "The Metal Emperor."

It was three years before the loyal fans of A. Merritt were privileged to read another Merritt tale. "The Face in the Abyss" was a novelette

(*Continued on inside back cover*)

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(*Continued from page* 161)
in the *ARGOSY-ALL STORY* for September 8, 1923. The publication of this novelette brought forth almost as many cries as had the original "Moon Pool."

The next Merritt tale is possibly the favorite of more readers than any other story. "The Ship of Ishtar," a six-part serial began in the November 8, 1924 *ARGOSY-ALL STORY*. Before this year was out Putnam brought this novel out in book form. A first edition of "The Ship of Ishtar" is one of the rarest of all the collector's items prized by fantasy fans.

Rejected by *ARGOSY* because "it was too beautiful and had no plot," "The Woman of the Wood" was published in August 1926 *WEIRD TALES*. It was reprinted in the January 1934 number of this same magazine, and was described as one of the most popular stories ever printed in that periodical.

"Seven Footprints to Satan" was the next Merritt novel. It was serialized in *ARGOSY-ALL STORY* in five parts beginning July 2, 1927. Boni and Liveright published it in book form in 1928. After being made into a movie, a photoplay edition was released by Grossett and Dunlap. This novel was read by a larger audience than any other Merritt book. It had a wider appeal because though the fantasy overtones were present it contained less of the macabre than the other titles.

In 1927, *AMAZING STORIES*, the new science fiction magazine reprinted "The People of the Pit" in its March issue. Later the same year beginning in May it reprinted "The Moon Pool" (the entire yarn) as a three-part serial and gave it a cover illustration by Paul. Later that summer the *AMAZING STORIES ANNUAL* appeared with both "People of the Pit" and "The Face in the Abyss" on its contents pages.

The long awaited sequel to "The Face in the Abyss" was titled "The Snake Mother." It was a seven-part serial in *ARGOSY* beginning October 25, 1930. The very nxt year, in 1931, Liveright, Inc. published "The Snake Mother" and "The Face in the Abyss" in book form using the latter title. In the minds of many this was Merritt's greatest novel.

In the January 23, 1932 *ARGOSY* was presented the first of six parts of "Dwellers in the Mirage." This is my own favorite Merritt tale. In many ways this was the most exquisitely beautiful of all his romantic and adventurous fantasies. Liveright, Inc. published it as a book during the same year that it appeared as a magazine story.

"Burn, Witch Burn!" (*ARGOSY*, six-part serial, October 22, 1932) and "Creep, Shadow!" (*ARGOSY*, seven-part serial, September 8, 1934) were the last two novels Merritt ever wrote "Burn, Witch Burn!" was published as a book by Liveright in 1933, and "Creep, Shadow!" was reprinted by the Sun Dial Press. This same tale was also abridged for a reprint appearance in the summer 1938 *DETECTIVE BOOK MAGAZINE*. Other published stories include a couple short stories, "The Drone Man" and "Rhythm of the Spheres" which appeared during 1936 in *THRILLING WONDER STORIES*. A couple of fragments of unfinished manuscripts were completed by Hannes Bok. Titles of these were "The Fox Woman" and "The Black Wheel."

Practically all of Mr. Merritt's stories have been reprintd by *FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES*, *FANTASTIC NOVELS*, *AVON FANTASY READER*, and other publications.

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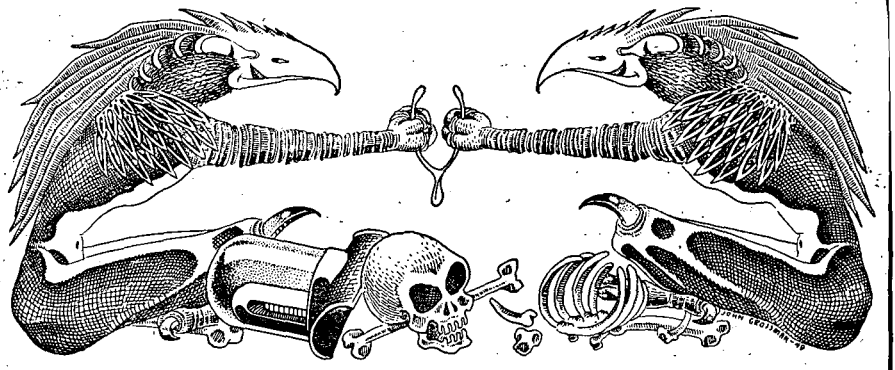

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